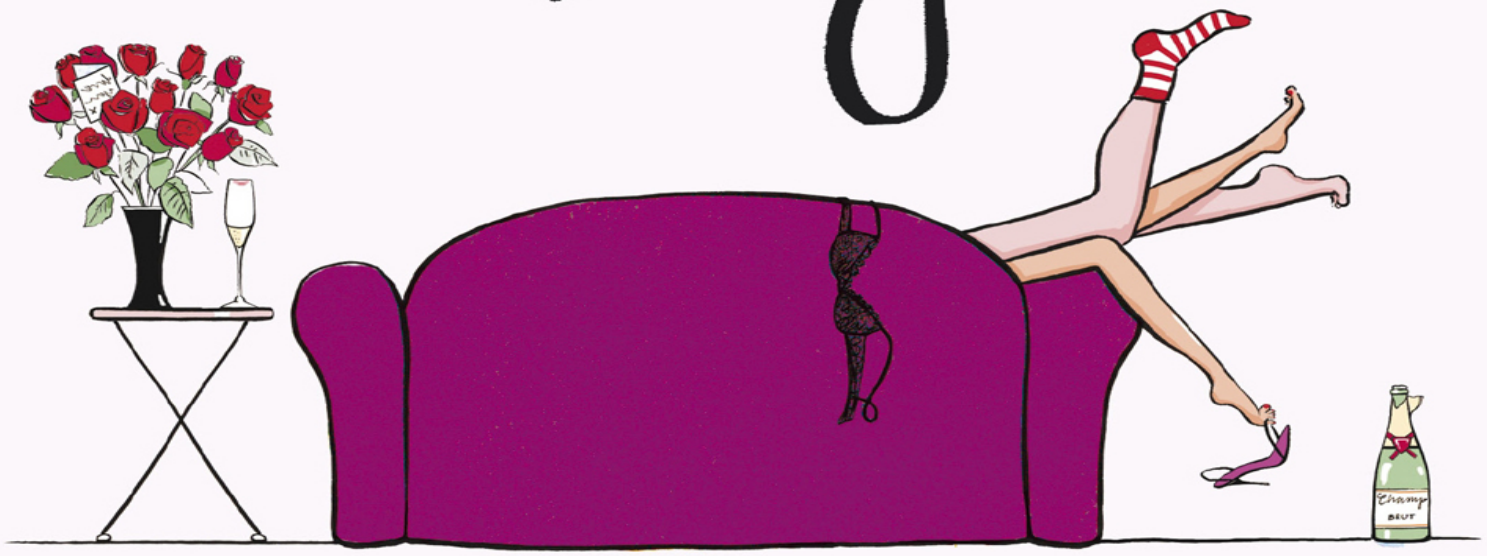
'Very funny, very romantic'
Jenny Colgan

Mr Almost Right



Right place. Right man. *Wrong time.*

ELEANOR MORAN

PENGUIN BOOKS

Mr Almost Right

Eleanor Moran is an executive producer for BBC Drama, where her credits include *Rome*, *Hotel Babylon* and *New Tricks*. Her first novel, *Stick or Twist*, was published to great critical acclaim. This is her second novel.

Mr Almost Right

ELEANOR MORAN



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Acknowledgements

For dearest Soph

Have you ever tried kissing a man you desire more than anything in the world with a gearstick lodged between the two of you? It's an evil metallic chaperone, priggishly digging me in the ribs every time I get too close. I greedily reach out to Charles, twisting out of my seat to get closer. He's slipping his hand inside my shirt now: a heat-seeking missile, desperate for flesh. I force my seat back, determined to grant him easy access.

'*Baa Baa Black Sheep, have you any wool?*'

I nearly jump out of my skin at the high-pitched nasal singing that's erupted from the back. 'What the hell is that?'

'*One for the master and one for the dame…*'

Charles scrabbles about, desperately searching around the dark recesses of the car.

'Oh God, Lulu, I'm so sorry. It's Theo's sheep. Just hang on.'

I'm ham-fistedly buttoning up my shirt, the spell well and truly broken. Desire a distant memory, all I'm feeling now is slutty and stupid. Meanwhile the sheep's reaching an unstoppable crescendo. Lucky sheep.

'*And one for the little boy…*'

Charles finally shuts it off, but by now I'm unlocking the door.

'I can't do this, I really can't do this.'

He grabs my wrist, awkwardly pulling me towards him.

'Hey, come back, it's stopped now.'

'I mean it, Charles, this couldn't be more wrong.'

'Darling, I –'

'Baa Baa Black Sheep…'

The sheep's back from the dead, louder and lustier than ever. It's fighting a rearguard action with the two child car seats, which loom menacingly out of the darkness like twin Alsatians. It'd be bad enough if they belonged to my own children, but of course they don't. They're his wife's. His shadowy, unknowable wife who I'd probably be the best of friends with in a parallel universe – a universe in which I wasn't her worst nightmare. I know I'm a nice person, I've got categorical evidence, so how the hell did I end up here? Please don't hate me on sight, I'm sure I can explain…

Chapter One

‘Chris de Burgh?’

‘Yes, Alice, Chris de Burgh. It actually suggested I might want to download “Lady In Red”. Am I wrong to feel this affronted by iTunes? I thought being dumped was insulting, but this might be worse.’

‘You must’ve done something to encourage it though. Led it on. Have you been pigging out on Phil Collins to get through the heartbreak?’

She gives me a crooked smile as she says it, letting me know how aware she is that I’ve been utterly crushed by Steve’s unexpected rejection. Eyes back on the road, Alice expertly spins the enormous white van round a tight corner, simultaneously shaking a Minstrel into her mouth from the bag that’s lying between us. Sometimes it’s hard to believe we’re related, let alone identical twins. If I were in charge of this lumbering vehicle, all our worldly goods would be splayed across the pavement by now. She’s been on the planet eight minutes longer of our thirty-two years, but sometimes it feels more like eight years. She’s the responsible one, the one with the answers. Whereas me, I’m a little bit of a flake.

We're moving out of our poky two-bedder in Hackney and into a little mews house in Barnsbury. It's going to be a stretch, but Alice has been promoted and I've got three months' work on 'Last Carriage to Avon', a soapy period drama for TV. I go wherever Zelda – the stately costume designer I work with – takes me. She's not been too well recently and I'm worried she hasn't taken on board how impossibly tight the budget is. Cut-price crinolines aren't really her thing.

Alice's nifty driving means we're on the doorstep in double-quick time. The street feels like it could almost be a location for the drama, what with the old-fashioned street lamps and poplar trees that punctuate it. We stand on the pavement taking it in. It's a world away from the bustling high street we've moved from.

'It's so quiet!' says Alice.

'We're going to love it,' I say fervently, suddenly feeling a profound sense of relief that we've got out of Brecon Road. I'm hoping that leaving it behind will help me leave Steve behind, and the stinging disappointment will start to ease. We begin to haul our dining table out of the back, knocking over our grandmother's standard lamp in the process.

'Sod it!' says Alice. 'We definitely need some man muscle.'

'Rufus promised he'd come straight after work.'

'God, Lulu, you know what he's like. He'll start cyber-talking with some troglodyte in Wisconsin about operating systems and totally forget we exist.'

Rufus is our uber-geek half-brother. Tall and gangly, with a long, insistent monobrow, we're convinced he's a virgin, even though he's pushing twenty. The fact that he works in computer gaming, an industry dominated by lovelorn workaholics with testicles, is hardly aiding his prospects. Alice and I are determined to find a woman who'll appreciate how great he is, but so far we've drawn a blank.

We're inelegantly lugging our sofa out of the back of the van when a booming voice rings out behind us.

'You must be the new tenants.'

Startled, I drop the sofa on my foot. The voice belongs to a tall, crooked pensioner, who's leaning on a stick.

'Um, yes,' I say, trying my best not to swear, despite the agonizing pain that's shooting through my big toe.

'Twins, eh. What are your names?'

'Alice and Lulu,' stutters Alice, looking uncharacteristically cowed.

'Surname?' he demands.

'Godwin,' I squeak, suddenly feeling like it's our first day in the army.

'Mm, I see,' he says, considering us. 'We're original residents, bought the house in 1960, brought up four children in it. You'll find most people in the street have been here for the duration.'

Our eyes swivel involuntarily to the small mews house we're moving into. Four children?

'Bunk beds,' he barks. 'I'd offer some assistance, but unfortunately my lumbar spine won't allow it. Anyway, don't hesitate to knock if

there's anything less physically taxing on the agenda. Mr Simkins, number thirty. We'll have you round for sherry once you're settled in.' With that, he hobbles off, leaving me staring at Alice in mute horror.

'Oh God, do you think we've done the right thing?' I ask her anxiously, suddenly hit by a wave of guilt. Alice only really agreed to the move because she knew how much I wanted a new start. She loved our ramshackle flat, bang in the middle of the urban sprawl, surrounded by vegetable stalls and artists' studios. Now we'll be bankrupts, unable to afford to leave the house, marooned in a sea of octogenarian curtain twitchers.

'We totally have,' she reassures me. 'It'll be an adventure, a whole new story for the Godwin Twins.' Our mum used to make up outlandish narratives for us when we were kids, in which we'd travel to exotic destinations and solve mysteries. We'd always race upstairs to bed just so we could hear what happened next. She died when we were ten, and carrying on the conceit somehow makes it feel like we're still holding on to a fragment of her. At least it does for me.

Rufus's impeccable timing means that he turns up just as we've manhandled the last heavy item up the narrow stairs. 'Sorry!' he shouts up after us. 'I was trying to write a code for a dialogue box and I lost track of time.' Obviously we don't pause to ask him what he means, we simply fall on the bottle of cheap white wine he's brought and flop down on the sofa. 'Couldn't you have asked Steve

to help?' he asks innocently, clocking how exhausted we both look. Rufus's lack of relationship experience is often painfully obvious.

'Considering he pretty much said, "It's not you, it's me," to end a two-year relationship, I don't think it would've been quite the thing,' snaps Alice.

I met Steve through a barrister friend of mine from university, who was determined that the two of us were a perfect match. She kept welding us together at parties and organizing elaborate dinners where her agenda was utterly transparent. It became a bit of a running joke between the two of us, which convinced me that he was totally uninterested. Besides, he seemed so sorted and self-sufficient, what with his thriving law practice and circle of scarily successful friends. When he finally made his move, after a drunken cab journey, I went with it. I definitely felt it in the moment, but now I look back on it, I wonder if timing played a bigger part than I realized. I was hurtling towards thirty, a good two years out of my last relationship. Snaring a good-on-paper boyfriend felt a bit like passing a test. But although I grew to love him (I think), some of those initial misgivings turned out to have a grain of truth. Do you think there's a snapshot of what will ultimately drive you apart in the first five minutes of meeting someone? A warning from future history, if only you could grasp it? Even if there is, perhaps it's better not to know, better to enjoy the moment, however fleeting.

I was in awe of Steve's zest for life, his determination to get the most out of everything he did, but it did leave me feeling a tiny bit hopeless. I love my work, but it's Zelda who's the shining star. Steve

always seemed charmed by me, if a bit bemused. I think he found me a total contrast to the kind of sharp-suited power bitches, jostling for partnership, who surrounded him at work. We had a lovely time together, no question, but when I think about it, I can see the writing was on the wall. I had a toothbrush and some tampons in his bathroom, but neither of us was pushing to go the whole hog. The idea of moving away from Alice is too gruesome to contemplate, so I guess I wanted to avoid touching on the territory until it became critical. As we approached the two-year mark, it was inevitable that we needed to start considering if our relationship was a keeper, particularly for someone as goal-orientated as Steve. Even so, the speed and brevity with which he delivered his decision made me realize how untouchable he must be in court. He loved me, but he couldn't imagine us wanting to build the same life long term. His next couple of years needed to be all about work and he didn't want to sell me short. I can't yet decide how much of my pain is hurt pride and how much is a genuine sense of loss.

I snap out of my reverie, zeroing in on the ongoing argument that we've been having with Rufus.

'It's called "My Single Friend", you realize,' he says. 'Not "My Single Little Brother".'

'That's not the point,' says Alice. 'No one's better qualified than us to sing your praises. What are you going to do, ask one of those social outcasts at work to do it? They'll make you sound like a dalek.'

‘No, Alice, I’m not going to ask anyone to do it. I’ll meet someone in my own time. Besides, it’s not like you two are exactly romantic role models.’

Although Alice has never been dumped, she’s also never managed to choose anyone remotely worthy. They’re always these hopeless wastrels who want her to give their barren lives some semblance of meaning. They send her Auden poems in the post and hang around outside the doorway making cow eyes and mooing. Luckily her social-worker streak is currently in remission: I just hope that when she re-enters the fray she’ll make a better call. But then, I don’t know if I’ll ever believe anyone’s good enough for my twin.

‘At least we don’t live on our own!’ I point out. ‘You just sit around eating beans on toast, watching Buffy box sets.’ Rufus’s crestfallen face tells me I’ve gone too far. ‘Sorry, I know you hang out with Richie and Nigel a lot.’

‘Yeah, I do. We’re going to a programming conference in Malvern in a couple of weeks.’

‘Great!’ I tell him encouragingly. ‘But think about it, Rufus. It’s only because we love you.’ I pause, looking at my watch. ‘Oh Christ, I’m really late for Zelda.’ I’ve promised her I’ll go and work through our initial ideas for the overall look of ‘Last Carriage to Avon’ before she pitches it to the director next week. Her favourite way to work is deep into the night, aided by a stream of fags and a bottle of good red wine. I love Zelda, but she’s temperamental, and one thing she hates is unpunctuality. Alice can see I’m panicking. My car’s still

parked outside the old flat and I've got to get to deepest South London.

'Why don't you just take the van?' she suggests. 'You've only had one glass of wine.'

'Are you on drugs? There's no way I can drive that thing. Anyway, I'm not insured.'

'News flash: we're identical. Just take my driving licence.'

It's true that the only thing that sets us apart is the mole on the side of my left cheek. We've both got thick black hair, which we wear longish so we can make ourselves look sufficiently different if we need to. Our noses are bigger than we'd like them, a trait all three of us have inherited from our dad, but in compensation we've got our mum's spookily green eyes. We're the right side of curvy, although my bum definitely looks bigger without the assistance of Lycra (thank you, God, for blessing us with Spanx). So unless you're peering at my face, or my naked arse, you'll have next to no chance of telling us apart.

Before long I've let Alice talk me into it and I'm nervously guiding the huge vehicle out of our narrow street. Oh God, I hope I don't crush any 'original residents' under its enormous wheels. Despite my shaky start, I gain confidence as I tootle towards Tower Bridge, but as my belief in my driving ability soars, my belief in myself starts to plummet. Feeling myself getting rapidly sucked into the depths of the dumpee doldrums, I turn the radio up loud and sing along determinedly to 'Like A Virgin'. But even Madonna starts to depress me as the lyrics send me into a neurotic tailspin about how long it'll

be till I have a gentleman caller again. I'm definitely going to need more than lurid fantasies about Jake Gyllenhaal to see me through the long winter nights.

It takes me at least ten minutes to park the van outside Zelda's tall South London townhouse. I arrive on the doorstep sweaty and stressed, but the anxiety starts to melt away when she envelops me in an enormous hug. She's been laid low with a bug, so it's been a good three weeks since I've seen her. She can be as scary as a hurricane when she's angry, but she's also the warmest, most caring person you could hope to meet.

'You clever girl!' she says, taking in the wonkily parked monstrosity. 'You'll be driving the costume van to set before we know it.'

She takes me down to her huge, messy kitchen, which is very much the heart of the house. Her myriad awards are randomly displayed above the Aga, alongside photos of her two sons.

'Let me get you a drink,' she says, starting to pour a bucket of wine out of the open bottle.

'Oh, Zelda, go easy,' I say, holding my hand over the glass.

'I think you might be rather glad of it,' she says, holding my gaze.

A flutter of anxiety starts up in my chest, but I know better than to try and badger her for information before she's ready to share. Instead I take a gulp and wait expectantly. She lays out her initial sketches on the table, which are, as always, a sight to behold. Handsome brutes with impressive whiskers stride around in tight

breeches, while delicate damsels look pretty in sweeping, flamboyant crinolines.

'They're gorgeous,' I tell her, 'but you do realize it's the worst budget we've ever had?' Zelda's been designing since the glory days of the seventies, when money was plentiful and you wrapped at four p.m., just in time for a gin and tonic.

'Pah!' she says, waving her hands in the air dismissively. 'If we go over budget they'll just have to cut back on the catering. I'm not having my name on something that looks anything short of divine.'

'But you promised them we could do it for the money.'

'I kept my fingers crossed behind my back. And, anyway, I know how industrious you are, darling. You'll have some ingenious ideas up your sleeve.'

I look at her anxiously, feeling mighty relieved that the buck stops with her. Her magnificent imperiousness always wins out over the bean counters.

'In fact,' she continues, 'I'm rather relying on your clever tricks.'

'What do you mean?'

'Lulu, I'm not terribly well.'

'I know, you've had flu. But you're nearly better now, aren't you?'

'It might be rather worse than that. They're doing some tests and they've asked me to take a few weeks off. I mean, I'm sure it'll turn out to be a storm in a teacup, but my doctor's been quite insistent.'

I fight down a tidal wave of dread, determined not to undermine her forced calm. It emerges that she's being sent in for a barrage of

CT scans, as they're concerned that her persistent low-level bug might be something more sinister than it appears.

'So does that mean you're going to get someone to stand in for you till you're back on form?' I ask her brightly, trying not to imagine the worst.

'Don't be so naive!' she snaps. 'It's high time you stepped out of my shadow and this is the perfect opportunity.'

'Oh no, there's no way I can take it on. I'll be hopeless.'

'Lulu, I really need you to do this for me. This business is nothing like it used to be. I don't want people thinking I'm past it, can't be relied on. I fully intend to be fighting fit as soon as is humanly possible, but until that point I need you to keep the shopfront fully operational.'

'But –'

'There are no buts. You *can* do it, and you *will* do it.'

With Zelda, resistance is futile. Besides, I know how much of a debt I owe her. She took me on as a dresser when I knew absolutely nothing – my entire career comes down to her. Decision made, she bats away any more questions about her health and insists we get down to business. She gives forth on her vision for the piece, the rich colours she wants to use to contrast with the slightly downbeat, soapy nature of the script.

'Quite frankly, I wish we'd never taken it on,' she confides. 'But January's so bloody slow.'

I'm quietly horrified by the idea of three wintry months' shooting without Zelda's Blitz spirit to keep us all going. But me whining is

the last thing she needs – it's time to get practical.

'I think we need to find some modernity within it,' I tell her, 'make a virtue of the fact that we've got bugger all to play with.'

'But it's period drama, darling – surely it's a contradiction in terms?'

'We need to pare it down more, use a brighter palate to take away from the fact that the costumes are not as elaborate as you might expect.'

She surveys me for a moment before she replies, dragging deeply on an inevitable cigarette.

'That's my point, Lulu, you're ready. You're not a duckling any more, you're fully grown. Go and sell your ideas to this, this –'

'Tarquin Butler.' Tarquin's the young, edgy director who's been brought in to give 'Last Carriage to Avon' the hipness and modernity that the producers inexplicably seem to believe is within its grasp.

'But don't forget what I've asked you to deliver,' she adds hastily.

I stay another half hour or so, but I can see that she's getting tired. When I kiss her goodbye I have to fight back the insistent tears that keep threatening to cascade down my face. Has her skin got a yellowish tinge or is it just reflected glow from the street light opposite?

'I'll ring you tomorrow, obviously,' I tell her, 'but please ask me if you need someone to come to any of the appointments with you.'

She shakes her head dismissively. 'Michael will be back by Wednesday; it'll be absolutely fine.' Michael's her husband, a director of photography who shoots all over the world. Considering

how hard they both work, with their sons safely tucked away at boarding school, I often wonder how unnatural it feels when holiday time dictates them living together as a normal family.

I get back in the van and shakily turn the key. Zelda's watching from the doorway and I'm determined not to let on how rattled I am. First off I stall, and then, grinding the gears like a tractor, I lurch off into the night. As soon as I'm out of view I feel the tears start to come. Of course I should pull over, but I just want to get home and pour it all out to Alice. Besides, I hate South London. I'm sure I'll feel less desolate when I'm the right side of the river.

I zoom down Kennington Road, going a little faster than a novice van driver should attempt. When I see a flashing blue light I convince myself I'm being neurotic; I'm only going a smidge over thirty and I've never been stopped before. But once it's zoomed up behind me, siren blaring, I have to admit to myself that it's my unlucky day. I wish I knew how to pull over elegantly. Instead I veer towards the kerb, crashing into it and stalling. A shadowy figure appears at the window.

'Evening, madam, very kind of you to stop for me. I'm going to need you to step out of the vehicle.'

Ooh, bit of a joker. I bite down a sarcastic response then do a double take when I get a proper look at him. He's youngish and sexy-ish, with a Scottish brogue that only adds to his appeal. He stands back and waits for me as I fumble with the central locking, radiating a self-assurance that comes from a sure knowledge that he's in charge. Maybe it's not just that: he's compact and muscular

in a way that must give him a jungle confidence. There's a hint of a smile underpinning the testosterone, a glimmer of amusement in his blue eyes which gives me a shred of hope. If only this were a particularly successful erotic dream rather than a blatantly unsuccessful piece of law-breaking.

I clamber down from the cab, trying my best to wipe away the thick, black mascara that's streaked down my face. He must think he's stopped a Goth with a sideline in house clearances. Why did I let myself keep chugging my way through that mammoth glass? I never would have if it hadn't been for Zelda's cataclysmic news. If I lose my licence I might as well head straight for the job centre. My role relies on me being able to drive myself to set for six thirty a.m. in whichever godforsaken bit of the country we happen to be shooting in. It would be a disaster any time, but right now it'd be beyond catastrophic.

'You were observed driving down Kennington Road at 23.12 at thirty-four miles per hour with a broken tail light,' he informs me officiously.

'So only a tiny bit more than ten per cent over. You must admit, in mathematical terms that's not bad.' What am I saying?!

'The bad news is that traffic regulations don't quite work that way. Were you aware the tail light was non-operational?'

'No, we – I mean, I hired the van to move house. It's not my actual van. I always keep my Peugeot well serviced.' I blush, mortified by my own verbosity and also by my use of the phrase 'well serviced'. He really is very handsome.

‘Very impressive,’ he says wryly. ‘But the van is your responsibility as the designated driver.’

Oh God, the designated driver. I’m suddenly hit by the horrifying realization that it’s Alice’s licence I’m playing fast and loose with.

‘I’m really sorry,’ I tell him pathetically.

‘The van’s a rental, is it? That explains your driving.’

‘Are you talking about the kerb? It just came at me…’

‘You were weaving across the road with no respect for the lane markings.’ I did have to lean right across to the opposite seat pocket to nab the last Minstrel, but I’m not sure it’s a robust defence. ‘I’ll need to breathalyse you, but first of all let’s get a name and address.’

‘Is that really necessary?’

‘Take a guess.’

His smart-aleck antagonism’s starting to really get on my wick, but I know I need to keep chowing down on the humble pie. ‘Louise Abigail… I mean, Alice Hannah Godwin.’ He’s staring intently now, clearly sensing a potential scalp. Cold panic spreads through my body, freezing my brain. What the hell is our new address? ‘Um, address wise, I think it’s 16 Culforth Mews, Islington, N1, N1… I only moved there today. I can call my sister and get the whole postcode.’ Don’t mention a sister! Even Nancy Drew would’ve most likely deduced that I’m an imposter by now, let alone this shark-eyed law enforcement officer.

‘Let’s get the test over first. I’d like you to breathe into this bag.’

I’m practically hyperventilating, struggling to pant my panicky breath into the plastic contraption he’s holding out for me. I can’t

believe I'm about to hurl Alice's clean driving licence down the toilet.

'Amber: you're very lucky it's not red.'

I breathe a huge sigh of relief, leaning back against the van for support. 'You see! I'm fine,' I announce smugly. He gives me a long look.

'So you won't mind performing a simple agility test then?'

'An agility test? Please don't. I promise you I'm not drunk, but I'm ever so uncoordinated. If we'd gone to school together, there's no way you would ever have picked me for rounders.'

'It's nothing complicated, just hopping to that postbox.' It's a good hundred yards away. I stare at him in mute horror, before hoiking up my right leg unsteadily. I'm poised for lift-off when I suddenly hear him sniggering.

'Scrub that. I'm just going to ask you to walk towards it in as straight a line as you can manage.' Bastard! I'm sure I could have him up on some kind of humiliation charge. I set off down the pavement, unsure how slow and how straight my walk is meant to be. I feel horribly self-conscious, like I'm walking down some peculiar catwalk.

'OK, you can come back now!' he finally shouts.

'Very decent of you,' I snap, unable to hold down my irritation. 'Are you sure you've followed proper procedure?'

'Feel free to report me for – what was it you were thinking of reporting me for exactly? It's PC Alistair Patten.'

I pause, feeling like a total idiot. 'Hopping,' I mutter.

‘Feel free to report me for hopping. As far as I know, neither of us did any hopping, but perhaps I missed something. I just need to see your licence before you carry on menacing the road.’

‘Yes, of course,’ I say meekly, retrieving it from my purse. What was I thinking, getting hoity-toity with him when I’m on such a sticky wicket? He peers long and hard, making some scary-looking notes in his pocket book. Finally he looks up, holding my gaze. Is that a ghost of a smile playing around his lips?

‘Thank you kindly, Alice. You’re free to go, but I hope you’ll take the Highway Code more seriously in future.’

‘Oh, absolutely,’ I tell him. ‘I’ll make it my bible.’

‘Little bit of bible-bashing sounds ideal,’ he counters, giving me a wave.

And with that I steer off into the cold January night hoping that this particularly stressful Sunday isn’t a stark warning of what’s to come. I find myself muttering a brief plea to Mum, just in case she really is sitting on a cloud looking down on us, to cut us some slack. Something tells me that this is a year when I’m going to need all the help I can get…

Chapter Two

Alice is a teacher, which means that, although she doesn't make mega bucks, she does get the longest holidays in human history. I, meanwhile, work the kind of hours that Siberian salt-mine owners would baulk at meting out. Or at least I do once filming kicks in. Right now we're in preproduction, which can occasionally be a bit of a doss for me as Zelda's such a control freak. Not this time. I spend the beginning of the week furiously sketching and poring over books on Victorian costume, trying to work out how I'm going to conjure up anything vaguely presentable. Of all the jobs for Zelda to fall ill on, this has to be the worst. And I can tell that she's far sicker than she's letting on by the sheer lack of contact. It's so hard to stay focused when I'm constantly distracted by my concern for her, but I know that the best thing I can do is cover manfully in her absence. She's desperate to conceal how little input she's had into the look of the show, which means I've got to try and reach the dizzy heights of a BAFTA-winning designer with the budgetary equivalent of a few rolls of polyester and some sticky-backed plastic.

'Shall we bother getting cable?' says Alice, wandering in in her tracksuit bottoms. She's already been for a run and brought back

posh coffees from Upper Street and it's only nine a.m. 'I mean, all we ever watch on it is "America's Next Top Model".'

'But we LOVE "America's Next Top Model". I reckon it's worth it.'

'OK, fair enough. That's pretty much the last account we need to set up.'

'Have you done them all?' I ask her, feeling guilty. 'I would've put some in my name.'

'Oh, don't worry about it,' she says airily. 'It's all done and dusted.'

Alice is the most organized person I know. Our dad's a science professor and I wonder if she's inherited her meticulousness from him. I start gathering up the piles of sketches that I've spread over our dining table and clipping them together.

'You've got your scary meeting today, haven't you?'

I'm meeting Tarquin Butler at his private members' club in just over an hour. I'm hoping his own inexperience will mean he won't detect mine.

'Yes, followed by a breeches fitting with the leading man at the costumiers. It's kind of action-packed.'

'Breeches,' says Alice dreamily. 'Try your best to make him look like Colin Firth in "Pride and Prejudice".'

'He's so not in that league. He's that Charles Adamson guy. Used to be the posh one in "Casualty".'

'Do they ever have anyone posh in "Casualty"?'

'That's why he only lasted a year!' I shout over my shoulder, running up the stairs to the bathroom. My room's still in chaos as

I've been working too hard to unpack. There's no time to wash my hair, but all I can find to keep it from getting wet in the shower is an unsightly pair of leopardskin G-string knickers. Steve was always buying me the kind of underwear I'd never have the audacity to wear, hence the fact they're still pristine. I'm tearing out of the house soon after, a bulging folder of sketches tucked under my arm. As I'm scouring the road for a cab, the sketches start to blow down the street.

'Bollocks!' I shout, chasing after them.

'Pardon your French,' says an ancient woman in a huge flying saucer of a beret, trapping a couple of sketches under the wheels of her shopping trolley.

'So sorry. Stressful morning,' I say, retrieving them from under the wheels.

'Don't worry, dear,' she says. 'I know how it is for you young women. Never enough time to catch your breath.'

'I'm Lulu,' I say, sticking out my free hand. 'I think we're your new neighbours.'

'Miss Lawford,' she replies. 'Very pleased to make your acquaintance.'

Maybe I'll introduce myself to Tarquin as 'Miss Godwin' and demand that everyone on-set addresses me as such. It could be the perfect way to cement my newfound status. Spotting a passing cab, I flag it down, giving my new neighbour an apologetic smile. Miraculously it delivers me to Soho with five minutes to spare. Tarquin's yet to arrive, so I order myself a double espresso and try

to order my thoughts. I'm scrabbling back through my drawings when he suddenly appears at my elbow. He's short and wiry, like a terrier, with spiky strawberry-blond hair. He looks like he inhaled his scarily on-trend wardrobe before leaving the house this morning. His skinny-fit black cords are set off by a pair of silken trainers, and his crumpled cotton blazer smartens the look to just the right degree. I immediately start to regret pulling on a bog standard pair of jeans: if you're better dressed than your costume designer, it's hardly going to inspire confidence. Still, he seems friendly enough, ordering himself an endearingly childish mug of hot chocolate and asking me about my Christmas.

Once our drinks arrive, it's time to cut to the chase. Struggling to control my nerves, I try to imagine that there's an enormous hologram of Zelda projected on to the wall in front of us; although after she's blown a smoke ring into my face and ordered me to sit up straight, I'm forced to vaporize her. I pluck out my rough ideas for Charles Adamson and give forth with my spiel about parsimonious chic.

'What we need to do is to find a contrast between the way we dress the different social classes, so that there's an internal logic to it all.'

'What, so we're cheap in a consistent way?' he says, poring over the sketches. I am so not ready for this. I should never have mentioned the paltry budget in my pitch: now he'll just think I'm a whinger. He suddenly looks up, a grin plastered across his face.

‘You’re brilliant, Lulu, you really are. Well, you and Zelda are. I’ve been freaking out about how I’m going to achieve it all, but you’ve totally got it covered.’

‘Thanks!’ I say, delighted.

‘I felt really lucky to get someone like Zelda, but I’m bloody glad I’m going to be dealing with you while I’m still finding my feet.’

‘What do you mean?’ I ask him, immediately defensive. ‘You know she’ll be back in a couple of weeks?’

‘Sure, I realize that,’ he says with a disarming look. ‘I shouldn’t tell you this,’ he continues sheepishly, ‘but there’s a distinct possibility I’m way out of my depth. I really can’t fuck this up.’

‘Oh God, I’m so with you on being out of my depth,’ I tell him, suddenly feeling much less alone. ‘But they gave you the job for a reason… I’m sure you’ll be brilliant.’

‘Thanks, Lulu. Now I’ve just got to hope you’re the all-seeing eye.’

‘Oh, I am,’ I tell him. ‘No question.’

He starts gathering up his stuff. ‘I’m sorry I can’t come and introduce you to Charles, but my location manager needs me.’

‘It’s fine. What’s he like though? Is he going to be all queenie and leading mannish?’

‘He seems pretty tame,’ Tarquin says, ‘but you know what actors are like.’

‘Yeah, they all show their fangs eventually.’

‘Exactly,’ he agrees with a knowing laugh.

First-day friendship firmly established, we kiss goodbye and I head off for the costumiers. I set off down Old Compton Street in the

winter sunshine, revelling in the fact that, for the next fifteen minutes, I'm answerable to no one. It's times like these when being single starts to feel like an adventure, a chance to blaze a trail across my own personal corner of the universe. At least until I'm confronted by a particularly mentally subnormal glamour model grinning out from the cover of *OK!*, breasts artfully jiggling at the fiancé she met on a reality show a matter of weeks ago. How unfair is it that she's luckier in love than me? What's she got that I haven't (other than £3,000-worth of silicone welded to her chest)? Transfixed, I have to stop and examine the ghastly pictures inside, earning myself a filthy glare from the newsagent and making myself late. I hare off down the street, taking a short cut down an alley lined with strip joints.

I arrive panicked and flustered, only to discover there's no sign of Charles. Or at least that's how it appears, until I realize that the Jon Bon Jovi lookalike who's deep in conversation on his mobile might just be my man. He's so engrossed that I'm forced to tap him on the shoulder. He wraps up the call and swings round, long rat's tails spinning in the breeze. He obviously catches my horrified look.

'Don't. I know. I'm a fright. I've come straight from the hair and make-up tests. It'll be all right when they've curled it all up, they assure me.'

'So it's extensions?'

'Obviously it's extensions!' he says, laughing. 'Just call me East Finchley's answer to Victoria Beckham. They were going to take

them all out, but it would have taken ages and I didn't want to be late.'

'I'm so sorry. You rushed over and I wasn't even here.' As I'm saying it, I feel myself reaching up to pull my own hair down in sympathy. Oh God, now I'm holding out my leopardskin pants like a religious offering. He stares at them, lost for words.

'They're clean!' is the first thing that springs out of my mouth. 'I mean, I was just using them to tie up my hair. I've just moved house, and…'

'Well, you're obviously the woman to ask about these things,' he says teasingly. 'I was wondering about bunches – do you think they'd suit me or are they just too retro Britney?'

'No, I can see you with bunches,' I tell him. 'Or even a top knot. Long hair's so versatile.'

We continue our ridiculous discussion all the way to his dressing room, where the costumiers have laid out a smorgasbord of outfits for him to try. I wait outside, after instructing him on the exact jodhpurs I want him in first.

'How did men ever pull women in the nineteenth century?' he shouts through the door. 'I can't tell you how huge my arse looks in these things. And do I really have to put that ridiculous ruffled shirt on?'

He opens the door, crazy hair caught round the back, and suddenly I see him from a whole new angle. It's not straightforward lust that strikes me, more a feeling of total understanding, like I've known him for years. He's leading-man handsome, no question, but

up close and personal he's far from flawless. His teeth are snaggly, like an ancient fence in need of attention, and his nose looks like it lost a fight with a lamp post. There's a slightly faded quality to his good looks; the laughter lines around his dark-brown eyes tell me he's pushing forty. But his crooked smile has a real warmth and kindness about it, a way of telling you that he'd stop his car in a heartbeat if you were stranded on the hard shoulder. Even the ruffled shirt and skin-tight trousers can't kill his appeal. Best of all, he's got no wedding ring. Stop it, Lulu. You are not going to have a relationship with your leading man, not under any circumstances. Actors are professional liars who get paid to show off. How's that ever going to add up to a good prospect?

'What do you think?' he asks, yanking me out of my moment of madness.

'Um, they're all wrong for you, totally wrong,' I snap.

'So I look like a total lard arse?' he replies, crestfallen.

'No, not at all. I just want you to look more… more…' *Less like a man I could be insanely infatuated with* is what I mean, but of course it's not what I say. Instead I start randomly throwing alternative outfits at him while treating him to a scintillating analysis of social injustice in Victorian England. We fix on a pair of oatmeal suede breeches for everyday, plus some full-on leather chaps for his horse-riding exploits.

'I'm starting the riding lessons next week,' he shouts through the door. 'Are you the horsey type?'

'I grew up in Queen's Park, take a wild guess.'

‘I can only just about drive a car,’ he says, ‘let alone single-handedly control a puffing, stamping beast.’

‘While wearing leathers,’ I add.

‘Quite,’ he says, emerging from the fitting room in his mufti. ‘Now, Lulu, if you can bear the abject humiliation of crossing the road with a man with longer hair than you, I’d very much like to take you for brunch.’

My heart does an involuntary skip at the thought of more time with him. ‘That’d be lovely, but –’

‘No buts. You’ve made me look like slightly less of a fool than I’d feared, and for that you must be justly rewarded. Are you a cheese person?’

‘Oh, I’m all about the cheese.’

‘In that case you’re in for a treat.’

We zigzag through the backstreets of Covent Garden, eventually finding the entrance to a yard, tucked away down a cobbled lane. It contains an amazing deli, entirely lined with random and delicious foodstuffs: salamis give way to lemons, swiftly followed by towers of croissants, while a cold counter is given over to a dairy’s worth of cheese. Charles leads me to the round, wooden table that acts as a centrepiece and pulls out a high stool for me.

‘Do you mind if I take command of the cheese ordering?’ he asks. ‘I’m a bit of a connoisseur.’

The combination of the commanding and the chair pulling is making my heart melt into a sludgy puddle at the bottom of my shoes. ‘Command away,’ I tell him inanely, doing my absolute best

to pull myself together. I'm going to have to spend the next three months with this man. If my unbridled lust isn't returned, it's going to be uber-humiliating. Professional must be my brand. The fact that my next question is 'So why are you so cheesy?' rather ruins the effect.

'I used to spend all my summers in Sweden with my dad when I was a kid. It's pretty much their staple breakfast.'

'Is that why you're fair? You're a secret Swede?'

'No, my stepmother's Swedish. My dad moved there to be with her.'

A miasma of sadness crosses his face, like a cloud blowing across the sun, but he forces it away with a determined smile. I find myself wanting to defy all the rules on how you're meant to behave with a virtual stranger, seized by an illogical desire to know everything about what makes him tick. Of course I don't start a full-scale emotional interrogation; instead I submit to his polite questioning about me. He asks if I've stayed in Queen's Park, and I tell him about the bizarre characters that Alice and I have washed up alongside in Islington.

'God, I'd love to have been a twin,' he says, laughing at my impression of Mr Simkins. 'I haven't got any siblings at all. I can't tell you how boring it is growing up in solitary.'

'Oh, it's got its downside,' I tell him.

'What?'

'I don't know,' I say uselessly. 'I just didn't want you to think I was being smug.' I ponder for a second, trying to imagine what I

would've gained from not being intertwined with Alice from the very moment of conception.

'I know I couldn't live without her,' I tell him, loving how intently he's listening, 'and sometimes that's too scary for words.' Losing our mum like we did has made me painfully aware, right from the get go, that no one's immortal. If I let myself spiral into imagining an Alice-free universe then panic overwhelms me.

'But surely it has to be better to have had something precious, and miss it fiercely, than never to have had it?' he counters.

'Yes, I suppose it is,' I reply, thinking that I'll need to take his observation away and unpack it. God, he thinks as well as twinkles. I mustn't get carried away. If by some crazy chance I've met someone special, it's vital I don't seem like a love-sick desperado; particularly considering my opening gambit was handing him my knickers. I try to steer the conversation into more impersonal territory, asking him about the play he's just finished in the West End and telling him about me and Zelda's last couple of gigs. Even so, our eyes keep meeting for a little longer than they should and I find myself having to stare unduly hard at the Vacherin in order to avoid conveying the sheer pleasure that being with him is causing. We could be talking in forensic detail about roadworks on the North Circular and I'd still be having a great time. There's a bizarre sense of connection that glides above and beyond our harmless chit-chat. I've got to remove myself before my feelings become too nakedly obvious. If this is going to happen, then I need him to think he has sought it out.

‘I ought to go,’ I tell him. ‘I’ve got to work on cocked hats for the farmhands this afternoon.’

‘I mustn’t keep you from the cocked hats,’ he says with a flirty smile. ‘I should shoot too. I’ve got to pick up my son from school in an hour.’

And with that, my world caves in. His son?

‘I didn’t know you had kids,’ I croak. I plaster an empty grin across my shocked face. ‘Or is it kid in the singular?’

‘God, no. I couldn’t put another generation through the hell of that,’ he says, his expression unreadable. ‘He’s got a little brother.’

‘Great!’ I say brightly, holding on to the vain hope he’s a divorcee. There’s no ring, for Christ’s sake. But I can’t think of a subtle way to ask and, anyway, I’m feeling way too humiliated by how obvious I’ve been. I never, ever feel this instantaneous chemistry – it’s always a gradual process of self-persuasion, an inching forward into an uncertain alliance. How utterly crushing that it’s over before it began.

Chapter Three

I wander down Gower Street in a state of shock, unable to compute what's just happened. If I try to explain it to anyone, even Alice, it'll just sound like I met someone hot and then found out they were married. Boo hoo, move on to the next. But the whole experience felt way more profound than that, and I'm convinced that he felt it too. Please let this be a 24-hour love bug, hellish while it lasts but easily shaken off. If it's a long-term condition, the next three months are set to be total torture.

Incapable of articulating it, even to myself, I spend the afternoon working in solitary gloom in the British Library. I'm hoping that by the time I get home to Alice it'll have started to feel like an amusing misunderstanding rather than a terrible twist of fate. Right now it feels like a full-scale tragedy, like if Romeo had joined the graduate trainee scheme at Superdrug and met some bovine chemist on the prescriptions counter, entirely missing out on Juliet in the process. Or if Cleopatra had… oh, you get my drift.

By five o'clock I'm still smarting and decide it's high time the comfort-eating phase kicked in. I make a pit stop at Marks & Spencer on the way home, filling the trolley with the kind of calorie-laden treats that might give even Augustus Gloop cause for

concern. I crash through the front door, laden down with bags, relishing the fact that I'm going to be able to talk over the whole sorry mess with the person who knows me best. Maybe Alice will have some amazing insight that will make the dull ache in the pit of my stomach go away. If not, at least I'll have someone who loves me to share the sticky toffee pudding with.

'Hi-ii.'

Oh no: not today, of all days. Oh yes. It's Jenna, Alice's most infuriating friend. I cannot understand why she likes her. Thirty-seven and single, she brings whole new layers of meaning to the word 'desperate'. A fellow teacher, she ricochets from torturous fling to torturous fling, invariably failing to learn anything from the last. Meanwhile she relies on Alice for more emotional support than anyone with an ounce of self-knowledge could believe is appropriate. I reluctantly push open the kitchen door.

'Hi, Jenna, how are you?'

She struggles to yank a smile across her features. It's not that she doesn't like me, more that the monthly Botox top-ups make facial expressions an uphill struggle. She's fundamentally very pretty – large hazel eyes, pert little nose, a sleek bob – but her lack of self-belief somehow undoes it all at a stroke. A nervy, bitter energy hovers around her like a swarm of hornets.

'Oh, you know,' she says with a self-deprecating shrug. 'How are *you*? You look a bit down in the dumps.'

Invariably depressed, Jenna loves nothing more than a partner in pain. I'm so not joining her team.

‘I’m great, thanks,’ I tell her, all faux jolly. ‘Just started a new job. Busy, busy. Where’s Alice hiding?’

‘She’s gone out to get another bottle of wine. I’m drowning my sorrows, you know…’

Oh God, here we go. She’s probably fallen in love with a serial killer in Wormwood Scrubs and then discovered he’s got a bit of a temper. Or discovered it, decided she can live with it, and then got chucked anyway. ‘It’s not you, it’s me. I only like women I can dissolve in acid.’ I’ve got to get a grip and stop being so mean. It’s just that becoming Jenna is my literal worst nightmare, and with a recent dumping and a pathologically intense crush on a married man I seem to be heading into dangerously similar territory.

‘Poor you,’ I tell her, well aware there’s no turning back from misery mile. ‘What happened?’ She visibly relaxes, thrilled she’s got carte blanche to launch in.

‘Oh God, Lulu, why am I always so unlucky?’ I’m about to utter a meaningless platitude, when I realize there’s no chance of getting a word in edgeways. ‘So I went to this wedding at the weekend, of my last single school friend in the whole world, and I’m all like, I don’t have a plus one, but I’m going to be really, really brave about it. Anyway, there’s this AMAZING guy on my table. Mid-forties, divorced, no kids, spitting image of George Clooney.’

I bet she’s got mixed up with George Hamilton. Or George Costanza. Grade inflation is an inevitability with Jenna.

‘Anyway, we’re getting on brilliantly. He’s asking me all about teaching, even though he’s got this big-shot job in emerging

markets. He just really seemed to *care*, you know?'

A banker? Doesn't this girl know any rhyming slang?

'So we don't talk to anyone else, just sit there getting totally wasted.' Women really ought to pay more attention to the fact that men tend to be twice their body weight. Your wasted translates to their mildly tipsy. 'So we're holding hands under the table, and then we go outside and we're snogging each other's faces off and his hands are just going everywhere, you know?' Oh yuck, I'm going visual. 'And suddenly we're actually doing it, over this car bonnet, and he's so incredible that I'm just going with it. It's a Mini though, so we're kind of falling off the side – in fact, I think I left my knickers hanging off the number plate.'

'You left your knickers on the number plate?' I ask her, trying my best not to sound too appalled.

'Yeah, I think so. Well, I left them somewhere anyway. But because we were having such a brilliant time it didn't feel slutty. Just seemed like it would be a funny story we could tell people when they asked how we met.' Ah, the insane mental time travel. Like Doctor Who on HRT, Jenna always catapults through time to the hordes of rosy-cheeked grandchildren she's destined to have with the latest nonstarter. Hang on, isn't that exactly what I was doing over the Gruyère? Can't go there.

'Then what?' I ask, needing rapid distraction from my own pathos. At least I didn't leave my bra hanging off a cheeseboard.

'Well, my hotel was nearer, so it made sense to go back there.' So she asked him back to her room. Fatal error.

‘And we did it, like, three more times. So he obviously really fancied me, but he had to get back to London first thing. We swapped numbers and everything, and he said he wanted to take me out for dinner on Tuesday.’

‘And?’

‘Well, we hadn’t made an actual plan, and he doesn’t call all Monday, but I know he’s super high-powered, so –’

‘Please don’t tell me you called him?’

‘I’m not like you, Lulu, I can’t play games.’

Damn. The last thing I wanted was to engage in a tactics conversation. I was meant to let the monologue wash over me, make a few sympathetic noises and then barricade myself in my bedroom.

‘I’m not saying you should. Just that men like a bit of a chase maybe.’

‘Yeah, well I didn’t want to just sit around waiting. It’s very disempowering. Besides, I wanted to book in for yoga if I wasn’t seeing him.’

Jenna’s got a brilliant line in pseudo-feminist justification. Desperate is as desperate does.

‘What did he say?’

‘I didn’t actually speak to him, I just left a message. I got his voicemail twice and I thought it would look a bit weird if I didn’t leave one.’

‘What did you say?’

‘Kind of “Hi, it’s me. Haven’t heard from you, and I was just wondering what the plan is for tonight. Call me.” I kept it very

light.'

Light? That 'haven't heard from you' will have told him everything he needed to know. 'Did he not ring back then?' I'm trying for sympathetic rather than pitying, but I'm not sure it's quite coming off. Where the hell is Alice anyway? How long can it take to buy a bottle of wine from a shop that's a hundred yards away?

'I didn't hear a peep till Tuesday afternoon,' she says, voice rising. 'Then all I get is this text.' She holds out her phone like it's a grenade.

> Going 2 NYC 4 a conf. Weekend woz GR8. C U soon xx.

'I mean, I just don't think I will see him now.'

'I'm sorry, Jenna,' I say, feeling genuinely sympathetic. That's the problem with her. By this stage in one of her stories you'd have to be the iron man not to get drawn in by her obvious distress. 'You're probably right though, it sounds like a bit of a dead loss.'

'But he was so great, Lulu, and it felt so right when we were together. Maybe that's why.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, he's had this horrible divorce. Maybe he's just frightened of falling in love again. Because he's known heartbreak.' She looks at me earnestly, hoping I'll validate her insane theory rather than crushing her with the truth: that sex on the first night is always a disaster, let alone the kind of sex in which your underwear gets reclassified as a chamois leather; that 'Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?' has lost none of its relevance fifty years on.

‘Either way, Jenna, I think you’ve got to let it go. Chalk it up to experience. You’ve had such a bad run recently: maybe you should take some time out.’

‘I haven’t got TIME for time out!’ she roars, just as Alice mercifully reappears. ‘You wait till you’ve got forty within spitting distance. You don’t know how hard it is.’

With Jenna, misery can turn to fury in the blink of an eye. I wouldn’t want to be a boy pupil on one of her down days. Five years old or not, you’d still be held responsible for the sins of the entire male race. ‘I’m sorry, Archie, I know you only dropped your rubber, but I’m afraid you’re on detention till 2025. That should give you just enough time to write “all men are fucking fuckwits” seventy thousand times.’

Alice immediately envelops Jenna in a huge hug. ‘He’s a twat, we know he’s a twat. It’s his loss. There’s someone so much more worthy out there just waiting to meet you.’

Alice seems immune to the fact that she’s given her this exact speech approximately three thousand times, without this much-vaunted deaf saint of a man ever making an appearance. Would it not be more useful to treat her to a few home truths and give her a fighting chance of sorting herself out? Still bristling from Jenna’s unprovoked attack, and enraged that she’s taken my evening hostage, I stomp upstairs with a tube of Pringles and set about unpacking. Alice can’t fail to read my mood and comes tapping on the door an hour later.

‘What’s up, fat face?’ she says, poking her head in.

But having had my very spirit crushed out of me by Jenna's relentless monologue, I've made an executive decision to pull myself together. I've spent enough time wanging on about Steve, without turning my whinge-o-meter on to a man who is most likely totally unavailable.

'I'm fine, Alice, honestly. I had a bit of a weird day, but…'

She cocks her head, knowing there's more, but I'm determined to maintain my stiff upper lip. If I give in to the feelings, I'm doomed.

'I'm sorry if Jenna was doing your head in.'

'No, it's OK,' I say, instantly feeling like a selfish baggage. Alice is like a bottomless pit of compassion, hence the fact that she's got enough lame ducks in her life to start a one-woman wetland centre.

'It's just that she hasn't really got anyone else. Anyway, I told her we had to watch "Top Model" live so no one tells us who's gone out before we've seen it.'

'Doesn't she want to watch it too? What kind of freak is she?'

'No, she says it makes her feel old and fat.'

'So what, is she going to go home and watch "Murder She Wrote" so she feels young and good at detection?'

'Don't be mean,' says Alice, laughing despite herself. 'I'll put the sticky toffee pudding in the oven when she leaves.'

And we sit up till long past midnight, moving seamlessly from 'Top Model' to our 'Scrubs' box set, talking incessantly over everything. There is nowhere in the world I feel safer than next to my sister, nowhere that feels more like home. Too bad that in order

to succeed at life we'll inevitably have to leave the cocoon behind us.

Chapter Four

There's nothing that Alice and I love more than a party. They've always been rather sophisticated soirées, if I do say so myself. We were trained up by our mum, who was always trying to encourage our gruff father to re-invent himself as a social animal. It was a fruitless task, so instead she poured her gregarious streak into us. We made our hostessing debut at five, when she threw us an elaborate fancy dress birthday party. We came as our favourite 'Grange Hill' characters, Roland and Janet, which led to a full-scale fight over who got to wear Roland's thick black glasses. For our tenth birthday, Mum baked us a Battenberg replica of Ramsay Street, complete with tiny marzipan Kylie and Jason figures. Little did we know that it would be our last birthday with her, but her devotion to the cause of entertainment lives on through us.

'We've got to have a theme, Lulu. It'll give it purpose.'

Alice is making us a round of toasted sandwiches while we try to nail down the plan for our house-warming. I do love hot, melted cheese for breakfast. Another reason why Charles and I are perfect for each other. Put him out of your mind, Lulu, for the love of God.

'But it might be more relaxing for people to feel they can just come and chill out. We don't have to make it some kind of social

assault course.'

'I'm not saying it should be,' says Alice irritably. 'I just want to make it feel like an event.'

That's when it suddenly hits me.

'Valentine's Day is a Friday this year. We can do pink cocktails and have heart-shaped fairy lights. It'll feel like it's got a theme without everyone having to hire Elvis costumes or come as tropical fruits.'

'Maybe,' says Alice, mulling it over. 'Though I don't want it to be all icky.'

'I'm not saying it should…'

'At least it'd give us an excuse to invite someone for Rufus,' she continues. 'There's this teaching assistant at school who seems really, really obsessed by Facebook.'

'He thinks Facebook's for total losers. Besides, I think we should start accepting the fact that he's gay. Him and Nigel are probably at it like rabbits.'

'If he was gay, why wouldn't he tell us?' says Alice, flipping the sandwiches out of the machine. 'It's not like we're Texan bible bashers.'

My mind flits momentarily to the sexy but aggravating policeman I promised I'd make the Highway Code my bible. He'd be great eye candy for the party, but I don't think 999 was invented for quite this kind of emergency.

'I'll invite Gareth. His gaydar's supersonic. I don't know why MI5 haven't recruited him yet.'

Gareth is my and Zelda's dresser: the poshest, gayest man you could ever imagine. If you ask him which knife you should use to eat trout or where best to score GHB in Soho on a Friday night, he'll answer either enquiry with complete confidence.

'Maybe because homosexuality's been legal for more than forty years?'

'Oh, you know what I mean,' I say. 'What about us though? It's going to be kind of grim if everyone's completely loved up and we're like a couple of dried-up old maiden aunts.'

'Maybe we should invite some of the neighbours for company,' says Alice, biting into her oozing toastie. 'Anyway,' she continues, smiling slyly, 'it's not as bleak as all that.'

Has she divined my feelings for Charles? I'm trying so hard to squash them down before shooting starts next Monday and I'm forced to see him again. The fact I haven't heard from him since Cheese-gate has convinced me that he must be married and I'm nothing but an unhinged fantasist.

'What do you mean?' I ask her anxiously.

'I've got a certain sizzle going on in the off-licence,' says Alice, looking coy.

'What, that lanky bloke who owns it? That explains why you left me on trauma detail with Jenna all that time.'

He's certainly not unattractive – youngish and personable, with a real passion for what he does – but Alice's taste is so uniformly flawed that alarm bells immediately start pealing in my head.

‘He’s really funny, Lulu. There’s a definite zing. He carried a box of wine round for me the other day when you were stuck at work and we were chatting for ages.’

‘Well, if we get the wine from him we’ve got the perfect excuse to invite him,’ I say encouragingly, determined to believe the best until proven otherwise.

‘But if he’s got a girlfriend tucked away in the cellar it could be totally humiliating,’ says Alice, and I think *welcome to the next three months of my life*. ‘I’d never be able to go in there again.’

Maybe that’s what I should do: throw a sickie for the next three months. Then I remember that Zelda’s genuinely sick and feel instantly guilty. She lives to work, and I know the fact that the job’s kicking off without her will frustrate her beyond measure.

Determined to keep Zelda feeling as involved as possible, I have roped Gareth into a trip round to her house for a pre-shoot debrief. I want her to feel like she’s still at the helm, not least because it might encourage her to come back on board. Besides, if I could hide behind her I could maintain an alluring and mysterious distance from Charles.

‘Why so mute?’ asks Gareth, who’s in charge of driving the van. There’s no way I’m risking anything bigger than a Cinquecento after my brush with the law, particularly on such a foul February day.

‘Oh, nothing… or maybe everything,’ I say, smiling ruefully. I consider telling him about Charles, but I’m stymied by how pathetic it sounds.

‘She will be all right, you know, she’s as tough as old boots. She’s like Granny Gareth.’ Gareth has a bizarre habit of characterizing his multifarious relations as though they’re extensions of himself. ‘She virtually contracted consumption because Mummy Gareth refused to turn on the heating at The Friars. There’d be full-scale fisticuffs over the thermostat. The doctors gave her a matter of weeks, but she was so determined to spite Mummy Gareth that she outlived her by a decade. There she was at the millennium, resplendent in her chair, cackling away.’

Gareth’s stories about his psychotic relatives never fail to entertain. Indeed, the tale of how his father built a palatial kennel complex for his gun dog, Brutus, while the East Wing of The Friars collapsed around the family’s ears keeps me distracted for the rest of the journey. We race from the van, laden with clothes, rain bucketing down. Zelda flings open the door, clad in a bizarre velvet turban, and immediately starts trying to ply us with hot toddies.

‘We can’t drink like you, Zelda,’ I protest. ‘We’ve got lily-livered livers, not like you baby boomers.’

I can hear myself talking up her stamina in an attempt to will her back to health. She dodges any attempts to broach the subject, fiercely focused on the costumes we’ve brought. She fingers the fabric of Charles’s frock coat, looking distinctly unimpressed.

‘I wouldn’t have given this house room fifteen years ago.’

‘I know,’ I say pleadingly. ‘But times are tough. We’re working our arses off to make the money stretch.’

I look to Gareth, silently appealing for support. Zelda's much more prone to sharpness with me, and I know how much she trusts his taste. He can always be relied on to be dressed top to toe in this season's hottest pieces, although it does mean he's often dressed in styles more suited to a younger man. Needs must: in the style-obsessed hinterland of gay clubbing it pays to knock a few years off. He grabs her hand.

'Oh, Zelda, the man's a fox. He'll be able to carry anything off with aplomb. I could barely tear my eyes away when we met.'

I ran the coat up from Charles's measurements and forced Gareth to do the final fitting. Since then I've been studiously avoiding any chat about him, knowing my tendency to blush would get me busted. And who knows how Gareth would react? He's got an acidic streak and the potential for on-set humiliation is uncomfortably high.

'Is he?' says Zelda, turning to me. 'From the little I've seen of him he strikes me as rather weak chinned.'

I'm squirming now, desperate to manufacture a casual nonchalance I don't possess.

'Yeah, I guess,' I say, sounding like a sullen teenager. 'If you like that kind of thing.'

'If he doesn't have charisma, he's simply not going to cut it,' snaps Zelda. 'The whole thing will look tawdry and we'll all be damned.'

'Zelda, he's gorgeous,' I say, emotion bursting forth. 'Even better, he's quirky gorgeous, not all sculpted and vain. He'll light up the

screen and no one will notice any of the compromises.' I'm shaking now, professional and personal pressure hammering down hard.

'OK, Lulu, simmer down,' says Zelda. 'I know you'll do a marvellous job. I just wish this business hadn't been taken over by penny-pinching charlatans.' Gareth is looking askance, but I stubbornly refuse to meet his gaze. 'Talk me through your plans for the sea rescue,' prompts Zelda.

This is Charles's great moment of heroism. In episodes one to three Lord Percival Lambert fights his feelings for his sister's comely maid, Bertha, despite their unwarranted attraction to one another. He's engaged to a haughty aristo who is deemed a perfect match. But when Bertha gets into difficulties while she's swimming, he races into the water, risking his life in a desperate attempt to rescue her. Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation follows and the floodgates of lust burst forth. Cue another ten episodes of breast beating, duelling and galloping hooves as Percy veers between love and duty – although if the horse budget is anything like the costume budget they'll probably be trying to lure piebald New Forest ponies into the back of the catering van.

'We need just the right degree of cling,' I tell Zelda, digging out my sketches.

'I bet he's got an enormous todger,' says Gareth dreamily.

'Why do you say that?' I demand, forgetting to self-censor.

'Oh, you can just tell,' he says airily. 'He's got the confidence of a man who knows he's well hung.'

‘Gareth, behave yourself,’ admonishes Zelda. ‘It’s impossible to do your job properly if you’re leading from the crotch. Did I ever tell you about my tête-à-tête with Peter O’Toole?’

‘Yes, Zelda,’ we chorus, knowing that her trips down memory lane can last an aeon. I carry on quickly, cutting her off at the pass.

‘I’m going to run up some duplicate breeches in something that’ll tighten up in the water. Maybe something with a bit of Lycra.’

‘They’ll be like cycling shorts by the time we’re finished,’ says Gareth, clapping excitedly.

‘Fine,’ says Zelda. ‘It’s his key scene, don’t forget. This is the point where we should all fall in love with him.’ *Too late,* I think, and then chastise myself for being ridiculous. We talk Zelda through our plans for the rest of the leads, earning her grudging approval. I try not to be exasperated by her faint praise, aware of how hard it is for a person as driven as her to be relegated to the subs bench. Work complete, I risk a tentative enquiry.

‘So do you think you’ll be back on side soonish?’

‘Oh, undoubtedly,’ she says. ‘These stupid doctors insist I need longer to rest, but they’re professional neurotics.’

‘How did the tests go?’ asks Gareth. ‘Have they found anything to give them cause for concern?’

‘It’s inconclusive,’ says Zelda dismissively, standing up. ‘Now surely the troops need sustenance?’

She turns her back on us, shoving a selection of M&S packets into the Aga. This is so un-Zelda – she’s the culinary queen – but there’s

nothing I can say which won't sound ungracious. She turns back, looking at me searchingly.

'How's the heart, Lulu? I do hope you're not still pining for that idiot boy.'

'I'm not, I promise,' I tell her, which is true. Instead I'm pining for someone most likely married. Doh! If Gareth wasn't here, I might tell her the whole sorry tale; despite her flinty moments, Zelda is someone who cares deeply about those she loves. But the work aspect means that I cannot afford to give it any oxygen whatsoever. 'My heart's a barren wasteland,' I tell her, 'but maybe our Valentine's party will change everything.'

I tell them all about it, explaining that its partial purpose is getting Gareth to scrutinize Rufus.

'Do you really think he's gay?' asks Gareth. 'Why wouldn't he share? Is your dad some kind of prejudiced Victorian patriarch?'

I wonder how Dad would react if Rufus was gay. Or if I was gay. Or if Alice was into bestiality. He's so remote that it's difficult to tell. When Mum died, he became more distant than ever, handing us over to the care of a series of au pairs. We pretty much looked after ourselves, with Alice taking command of whichever mousy Swede was nominally in charge. Dad was always at university, jiggling test tubes or firing up Bunsen burners or whatever it is that chemistry professors do. After a respectable two years he introduced us to our stepmother-to-be, the youngish sister of one of his colleagues. Julia's perfectly nice, but she's no Mum, and nor did she ever try to be. Me and Alice were such a unit by the time she pitched up – insolent

pre-teens with too much to prove – and she never attempted to go head to head. Instead she popped out Rufus and our higgledy-piggledy family limped on like two separate battalions in a single barracks. It was only once we hit our twenties and got over ourselves that we were won over by Rufus's toothy charm. Dad's taken a fellowship in Boston so we're allowed to enjoy Rufus without having to take him or Julia into account. He's coming home for a conference soon, a prospect I feel stupidly nervous about.

'Dunno,' I say. 'What might the clues be?'

'Oh, don't be so facetious,' snarls Gareth, who's drearily defensive about gender politics. 'Do you think gays all worship at the temple of Dolly Parton and have their balls waxed weekly?'

'Oh, yuck, I'm imagining Elton John's undercarriage now. And no, I totally don't think that.'

'Does he like rugby?' says Gareth, softening.

'I think so. Don't all men like rugby? It's one of the many reasons I don't understand them.'

'Hmm, you need to see where his priorities lie – with the score or the players. My floor-to-ceiling posters of Will Carling were the only thing which got me through the ignominy of boarding school.'

As Rufus would most definitely smell a rat if Alice and I suddenly developed a passion for rugby, I tell him we'll have to stick with Plan A. Mind you, it's pretty much impossible to engage with anything beyond week one of filming right now. Every time I think about Monday, my whole body clenches up with terror. As I hug Zelda goodbye I fake a confidence that I just don't feel, determined

not to give her anything else to worry about beyond her own recovery. I can get through this – can't I?

Chapter Five

Come Monday morning, the incessant screech of my alarm clock kicks in at five a.m. I slam it off, acutely conscious of Alice's two hours' grace, and reluctantly drag my weary body from the cosy embrace of the duvet. I catatonically brush my teeth, looking through the window at the inky darkness and wondering what on earth possessed owls to plump for nocturnal. Why would anyone want to be awake in this?

There's something fun about having the road to yourself, even if it's hard to feel like Lewis Hamilton in a Peugeot 206. The first location is out near Oxford, so I bomb down the North Circular, hoping that the hot policeman hasn't kept my details on file. Then I remember he's got the wrong ones and press my foot down wickedly hard on the accelerator.

Tragically, the costume team have to be on-set extra-specially early, all ready to get the cast suited and booted the moment they arrive. I'm gratified to find Gareth's already marshalling our troops, sorting through outfits with literal gay abandon. I look at the call sheet nervously, desperate to know when Charles is due in. Not till 11.30, giving me a good five hours to practise the calm authority I'm desperately trying to summon up. Tarquin comes bounding over

the moment he sees me, kissing me on each cheek as though we're gay Parisians.

'Lulu, I'm so glad you're here. Day one is pretty grim, isn't it?'

'Isn't it just?' I say.

'I've got the runner grabbing you a proper coffee. Step inside my trailer and talk to me about Charles Adamson's tackle.'

Thank God it's still dark: I know for a fact I'm an unattractive shade of violet. I talk him through my plans for the sea rescue, which we're due to shoot next week, and he complains to me about our leading lady's pretensions. Emily Hill is a 23-year-old beauty, way too aware of her own gorgeousness.

'Six months out of "EastEnders" and she thinks she's Dame Judi. She keeps banging on about how many meetings she's had in LA, but I reckon the only meeting she had was with Dr Trout Pout MD.'

'They are pretty pillowy,' I say, laughing.

'I can't fucking bear actors,' says Tarquin, and I find myself momentarily wondering why he's chosen this particular line of work. 'Sorry, Lulu, you make me disgustingly frank. Why is that?'

'I don't know,' I say, stuck for an appropriate response. 'I'd better get back out there – we're knee deep in serving wenches.'

I hurry round the various caravans, making sure everyone looks immaculate. With so much to prove, I'm determined not to leave anything to chance. Before long, it's scene one, take one, a shot of the maids preparing a feast. I allow myself to breathe out, glad that the train's finally left the station. Now I've just got to hold on to the running board for the next few weeks. The scene's from episode

two, in which the Lamberts throw an elaborate party to celebrate Percival's upcoming nuptials, little knowing that his heart belongs to another. Why is it that whenever I think about the plot I slip into sub Mills & Boon parlance?

Take after take ensues, with Tarquin desperate to capture the action from every angle. The producer's a world-weary lifer, who's been doing this job for years under increasingly difficult circumstances. There's no love lost between her and Zelda: Zelda's eternal quest for perfection is diametrically opposed to Suzanne's determination to come in on budget, but they've known each other since the dark ages and share a grudging respect. Exasperated by the amount of takes that Tarquin's insisting on, she drags me to one side.

'Christ, Lulu, does he think he's Orson Welles?'

'He just wants to do the best possible job,' I tell her, feeling protective of my fellow novice. 'He's super-committed.'

'Been bonding, have you?' she says wryly. 'Are the youngsters planning a coup?'

'I'm hardly an ingénue any more.' Suzanne's known me since I was a lowly dresser and never lets me forget it.

'I'm well aware,' she says patronizingly. 'When *is* Zelda due back? She told me that now she's designed all the costumes she might go to Rio de Janeiro to recuperate from the glandular fever.'

Rio de Janeiro? Glandular fever? Typical Zelda, never one to under-embellish. 'Um, back soon, I'm sure…' I say, at a loss for the best way to play the situation. If Suzanne knew how behind our

department is as a result of Zelda's illness, or how much is resting on me, she'd have kittens. Luckily her steely determination to keep the show on the road saves me from any more awkward questions. As Tarquin shouts 'cut' on his latest take, she strides over.

'Right, moving on…' she bawls, forcing him to settle for what he's got and progress to the next scene.

We're now only one set-up away from Charles's debut. I imagine him halfway down the motorway and wonder if he's as nervous about seeing me as I am him. *Of course he's not*, I tell myself, *it's all in your head*, but my heart refuses to be convinced. Before long I receive word he's in his trailer and hurriedly pull Gareth aside.

'Will you go and talk him through his outfit?'

'*Naturellement*, but wouldn't it be better coming from you? It is all your vision, even if we're telling certain people otherwise.' He casts a significant look in Suzanne's direction.

'Oh God, I know. And, yes, I suppose you're right. I just thought, what with you being a boy…'

'You do realize he's married?'

'Yes!' I snap. Are my feelings that obvious?

'So he doesn't bat for my team, if this is you trying to pull off some hare-brained romantic enterprise. I was being flippant at Zelda's.'

'I know he doesn't,' I bluster. 'Forget it, I'll go myself.'

I stamp towards Charles's winnebago, filled with remorse at my poor man management. Gareth's my partner in crime, the last

person I want to alienate. I force myself to find some inner poise and rap sharply on the metal door.

'Come in,' Charles calls and I push it open. He's Blu-tacking a picture of a small, blond boy in glasses to a cupboard door.

'Oh, hi,' he says, looking – I don't know – anxious. There's an uncomfortable pause.

'I wanted to talk you through today's costumes,' I say, trying to find a way through. Too cool and he'll know I'm gutted, too warm and I could slip into bunny-boiler territory.

'Great, um, that's excellent… so what are they?'

The awkwardness is palpable. How can one shared cheese plate render two grown adults this socially inept?

'Um, there's a jerkin. Some hose…' Why does everything sound like it comes from a sex shop? I'm trying so hard to suppress a giggle, terrified and tantalized by the idea of all that chemistry flooding back in. I rattle through the scenes we're shooting, giving him a rough idea of his outfits.

'Ben's going to be your dresser. I'll send him right over. If you've got any larger concerns, just speak to me or Gareth.' God, I'm good. Ruthlessly efficient and steel-knickered. Then I realize my gaze is glued to the picture of his son, a smaller, sweeter version of him.

'What's he called?' I ask, almost involuntarily.

'Maxie,' he says. 'We've got to start calling him Max, but he's been Maxie since he was born.' A smile wreathes his face, his eyes soften, and then as soon as the transformation occurs, he shuts it down. The

casual use of ‘we’, combined with the appearance of a wedding ring (where the hell was it last time?), tell me all I need to know.

‘That’s… that’s a lovely name. Anyway, any problems, just shout.’

‘Received and understood.’

Pain spreads through me as I realize that, despite all I’ve discovered, my feelings are still bubbling away unbidden. I think the shock makes me momentarily lose control of my faculties.

‘Roger,’ I reply, giving him a salute. A salute?!

‘Roger?’ he says, casting me a bemused look.

Oh God: how mortified am I? I may as well have said ‘shag me’ as my parting shot.

‘Sorry, I have no idea where that came from. I’m going to leave now.’

I scuttle out, vowing to hand over Charles Adamson duty hook, line and sinker to Gareth as I clearly can’t be trusted. I spend most of the day hiding out in the wardrobe caravan, trying to recover from the humiliation. I leave set at five and head home via the tailors, coming through the door just as Alice gets back from school.

‘How was it?’ she asks excitedly, giving me a hug. One of the things I love about my sister is the fact that when she asks a question like that, you know she wants a proper answer. There’s none of that glazing-over distraction that so many people suffer from when the conversation switches away from themselves. However, it makes it almost impossible to bullshit her, and I’m loath to tell her how mangled up my heart has got. She’ll fret and fuss until I promise I’m over it, and I fear it won’t be that simple. Instead

I divert her with the outrageousness of Zelda's lie and the precarious grip I've got on the reins. It's nothing compared to her day, which involved lifting a 5-year-old's poo out of the sand pit with only a plastic bucket and spade to assist.

'It was so gross, Lulu, I can't tell you, and the headmaster walked past when I was literally waving it in the air.'

'We definitely deserve a bottle of wine. You realize what that means, don't you?'

'We've got the perfect excuse to check out the Welsh hottie in the off-licence!' says Alice gleefully. 'I'll go and attach my nipple tassels.'

She doesn't go quite as far as that, but she does put on a gorgeous red top and gives herself film-starrish kohl-covered eyes. I put my hair back in a mousy ponytail and change into some mediocre jeans. Here's the thing: if one of us has a crush, the other has to stand back in quite a major way. If she's his physical type, the odds are I am too, so it's important I Deirdre Barlow it up until she's sealed the deal. And the deal's looking scarily likely, judging by the grin he gives her when we come through the door. I can kind of see the appeal – he's broad enough to fill his crumpled white T-shirt convincingly and his tanned arms look sinewy and muscled from all the box humping he must have to do. He's definitely fit, but blandly so, like a cheap knock-off of Brad Pitt. And I feel like there's some calculation going on behind his slate-grey eyes. Is it my imagination or does he contemplate us a second too long before he speaks?

'Hello, again. What can I tempt you with tonight?'

‘Surprise me,’ Alice replies coquettishly.

‘First of all you need to introduce me to your famous twin.’ He sticks out his hand. ‘I’m Richard, I’ve heard all about you.’

I wonder if he has or if he’s buttering me up. I know I talk about Alice continually without even noticing I’m doing it, but I don’t know if she’s as bad. He’s swivelled back towards her now, twin duty dispensed with. As they’re talking about the consistency of Côte du Rhône as though it’s his sperm, I decide it’s time to give them some space. I go and hang around the Italian whites, wondering how to wean myself off Charles. It’s always like this in the in-between times: it’s completely impossible to imagine how you could ever meet anyone. Right now it seems more likely that I’ll be whisked off my feet by Tom Cruise and converted to Scientology than meet an ordinary, decent man I can fall in love with. Looking over, I see that Richard’s wrapping up a bottle for us, and wonder if the chat’s run dry. I head back over as Alice’s phone starts to ring.

‘Oh no, it’s the headmaster. How much more is there to say about an infant turd?’ she says, backing outside to take the call. Richard looks understandably flummoxed by her remark.

‘It’s taking a bit of time to go through,’ he says eventually. We both stare at the card machine, contemplating this self-evident truth. It’s so obvious I’m not the point, particularly as I’ve come dressed as the twin who fell out of the ugly tree.

‘So have you had this place long?’ I ask him.

‘No, it’s only been about six months. My dad put some money into it. He’s a wine critic… Oh, sod it, it says I need to ring them.’ His

jaw's set with irritation.

'Don't worry, I can answer anything they ask.'

He punches a number into the phone and hands it over once he's connected. I sail through date of birth and address, but when they go for significant date rather than mother's maiden name I start to struggle. I try Mum's birthday, then Dad's (which takes a tellingly long time to recall) and then, when it's not Rufus's, get locked out. I try a bit of wheedling, but they're not interested.

'I'm sorry,' I say, handing it back to Richard. 'They say you've got to cancel the transaction.'

'That's ridiculous!' He rips the phone out of my hand. 'What the hell is your problem? She's a regular customer, there's no issue here.' There's a pause. 'No, you calm down, you incompetent moron.' Another pause, during which he starts to shake like the Hulk. 'For fuck's sake!' He slams the phone down, red in the face, just before Alice bounds back in the door.

'Sorry about that. He wants me to talk to the parents and –' She clocks my expression. 'What's up?'

Richard jumps in, all charm.

'They wouldn't accept your card, I'm afraid. Don't worry, you can pay me next time you're in.'

'Are you sure?' she says, positively simpering.

'Great. Thanks, Richard,' I say, grabbing her arm. 'We'd better be getting back.'

'Hang on…' she protests.

‘Alice, come on, it’s ten minutes till “Grey’s Anatomy”. Let’s get going. Bye.’ I bare my teeth in an approximation of a smile and hustle her out.

‘What’s your problem?’ she says, rounding on me.

‘He’s the angriest man in the world. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was him who poo’d in the sandpit. It’s the kind of thing he’d do.’

‘What are you talking about? He’s completely lovely. I wanted to ask him about booze for the party, and then I could’ve invited him.’

‘Oh no: he is SO not on the guest list.’

I recount the whole hideous scene, but she’s unmoved.

‘He was being protective of us. Why are you so bad at accepting help?’

‘Why are you so incapable of judging character?’

‘Yeah, cos Steve was a great choice, wasn’t he?’

I’m about to hit back, when I’m kiboshed by the accuracy of the insult. She’s right: he was a terrible choice, a choice only trumped by the decision to fall for a married man. I can feel myself crumpling as Alice throws an arm around my shoulders.

‘Oh, Lulu, come here. I’m really sorry, I didn’t mean it.’

And she reminds me what a knob he was all the way home, and how much better the next one will be. And although I know they’re platitudes, I can’t help but be comforted. It’s not even the words, more the timbre of her voice and the solidity of her presence. Soon we’re ensconced on the sofa, quaffing Mr Angry’s wine, the argument forgotten.

‘What was the date, anyway?’ I ask her, unreasonably frustrated that I couldn’t read her mind. ‘Was it Mum’s anniversary?’

‘No,’ she says, brisk. ‘It was my graduation date.’

‘Oh,’ I say, surprised that she chose something so prosaic.

‘What are we going to do about Dad coming over?’ says Alice, after a pause. ‘Do you think we should ask them to stay? We’ve technically got room. We’ve never had room!’

‘He won’t slum it with us,’ I say. ‘He’ll want to stay in some grimola corporate hotel in town.’ I hate how acid I sound. I guess there’s a part of me that longs for him to be more engaged.

‘We should definitely ask,’ says Alice brightly, choosing to ignore the barb. ‘They can only say no.’

I think about articulating what I feel, but the problem is that it’s exactly that: no more than a feeling – it’s not like he’s done anything wrong. He was offered a fantastic opportunity in the US and he took it. It’s just that some part of me feels that we were deserted, right from the moment Mum was taken away. Before I decide whether to give voice to this or not, Alice has determinedly moved on, focusing on our plan to dig up some suitable romantic prospects for Rufus in time for the party. My suggestion of Gareth falls on stony ground.

‘We should work on the basis that he’s straight till proven otherwise,’ she says. ‘Besides, Gareth would eat him for breakfast.’

It’s true enough, but I’m struggling. I’ve invited Briony, the youngest dresser, while Alice has gone for the comely classroom assistant.

‘Maybe that’s enough,’ I say. ‘Anyway, it’s a lost cause. He’ll probably start taking his laptop to bed with him soon. Just to cuddle, not for porn.’

The mention of bed reminds me that I’m still on normal time, not yet adjusted to stupid o’clock. Even if I go to bed right now I’ll have to get up in five measly hours. And that’s without allowing the extra half hour it’ll take to make myself look like I’ve made no effort, I’m just naturally gorgeous. Not that I should be worrying about something so patently ridiculous. I know I can’t have him, that I shouldn’t even want him, but it turns out it’s way less simple than that…

Chapter Six

‘Now, Lulu – be honest with me – do ringlets round out my face? I’m just not sure if I can carry them off.’

Emily delivers this searing enquiry with a girlish giggle, which makes it absolutely clear what the correct answer is. I’ve now been imprisoned in her winnebago with no hope of parole for the best part of an hour. So far we’ve covered her lipstick (is natural natural or just plain dowdy?), her manicure (will her polish get caught on camera and, if so, must she really lose it?) and now the hair. I catch myself staring out of the window at Charles’s trailer, willing him to emerge.

‘Lulu?’ she snaps.

‘Sorry, I was just giving it proper thought. Ringlets are great for you. A lot of people couldn’t carry them off, but with your bone structure…’

I know, I know, I’m a hypocrite – but keeping a rampant egotist like her on side will make my life immeasurably easier.

‘Thanks,’ she says, patting them delightedly. ‘I was hoping they worked, but…’

Sensing another conversational cul de sac, I get up and start gathering my notes.

‘I had a couple more things I wanted to run through with you,’ she says, clutching my wrist with her bony little hand. ‘We haven’t really got on to costume at all,’ she adds whinily.

Not for want of trying, I think. Hair and make-up aren’t even my department, but she’ll take any excuse to spin out the subject of Emily.

‘Don’t worry: we’ve got all the time in the world. I promise we’ll make you look gorgeous.’

Not too gorgeous, I think to myself, remembering how many love scenes she and Charles have got. Lucky bitch: she doesn’t have to worry about the fact that he’s married. She’s being paid to kiss him. I wish someone would pay me to kiss him.

‘Good, because Felicity gets gorgeous dresses, and all I’ve got are, like, aprons and shit.’

‘I’m on it,’ I say, opening the door just as Charles pops his head out.

‘Lulu!’ he says then grinds to a conversational halt.

‘Hi,’ I say. ‘How are your breeches?’ Oh God, what’s happened to my sense of decorum? He must think I’ve had a lobotomy since our fateful brunch.

‘Oh, you know. Ben’s been doing me proud.’ Is that a pointed reference to the fact that I’ve been avoiding him like the plague? I just admire him longingly from behind the camera, not trusting myself to make conversation.

‘I told you I’d put my best man on it,’ I say.

He looks at me a moment too long, with more than a hint of a twinkle. I stare back.

'How's Max?' I blurt out, which roughly translates into 'I know you're married, don't you dare think I'm obsessed.'

'Terribly well,' he says, jogging down the metal steps of the trailer. 'Are you heading over to set?'

As soon as we set off, I regret my decision. Conversation is beyond stilted. Thank God we're rescued by the arrival of Briony, who catches us up from the wardrobe caravan.

'Lulu, I'm really sorry but I've got a date tomorrow night. I'm sure your brother's nice and everything, but I really like this guy and as it's our only weekend off for ages…'

'Are you having a Valentine's party?' asks Charles curiously.

'Oh, is it Valentine's Day?' I say unconvincingly, not wanting him to think I'm like some kind of romantic truffling pig, eternally snuffling around on my trotters, fruitlessly searching for love. 'It's just our house-warming.'

'Sounds fun,' he says, and I wonder if he's expecting an invitation. Luckily the third assistant director arrives to take him on-set, sparing me from any more pointless attempts at interpretation. I wish I could tell Alice everything: she'd understand what a Polish speaker he is.

The concept of Polish speakers comes via a particularly browbeaten au pair we had, Slavka, who would get more and more heavily accented as her frustration increased. This would often be because we'd refuse to tell her which of us was which, making it

almost impossible to punish the right twin or force me to go to my hated piano lessons. Every time she asked us to do anything, we'd chorus 'We don't speak Polish' and race off into the garden. In adulthood we've extended the phrase to cover all the unintelligible garbage that one's fed by random men. Examples: 'I'll call you.' This might mean he'll call you in an hour or, if he's a Polish speaker, that you'll never hear a peep from him again. 'My ex was great, it just didn't work out.' In Polish this translates into, 'The bitch dumped me and now I'm going to take out all my blinding rage towards the female race on you.' I'm definitely in Warsaw with Charles. Is he as attracted to me as I am to him or are his sudden bursts of interest nothing but bland social nicety? Either way it's irrelevant: he's married.

He's on-set now, tightly encased in the breeches he tried on that first time we met. I approach the monitor, where Tarquin's lining up his shot. We're in the library of the stately home in Oxford where most of the action's being shot. Bertha, played by ghastly Emily, is meant to come upon Percy as he anguishes over the loveless union he's doomed to enter. As she asks him what ails him, he can't help but silently communicate his dangerous attraction to her. At least he would if the silly cow would leave her trailer.

'Where the fuck is she?' barks Tarquin.

'She seemed fine half an hour ago,' I tell him. 'She was in costume and ready for her call.'

'She likes you, doesn't she?' he says.

'Um, I think so.'

The third assistant director interrupts us.

‘She’s two minutes away,’ he says. ‘She says she was meditating and didn’t hear us knocking.’

‘I hope she was channelling Vanessa fucking Redgrave,’ growls Tarquin. ‘It’s the only acceptable excuse for being this late.’

Emily glides on to the set, giving a dismissive wave to the waiting crew. ‘Sorry, Tark,’ she wheedles nasally, her stage school posh accent in abeyance. ‘Where do you want me?’ This is delivered with a flirty toss of the curls, entirely lost on the furious Tarquin. My eyes involuntarily swivel towards Charles, who holds my gaze a second too long, slightly rolling his eyes. Hurrah: he hates her too! That means there’ll be none of this Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton nonsense where their love scenes tip over into off-screen passion.

Filming is way less glamorous than it looks from the outside. The same snatch of dialogue gets performed again and again as the director captures it from every conceivable angle. However, I can’t tear myself away, desperate to prove to myself that Charles is immune to her charms. God knows she’s pretty, what with her heart-shaped face and perfect hourglass, but there’s something beady about those big green eyes and her mouth can move from pout to sneer in the blink of an eye. And as for her acting – calling her wooden does trees a great disservice. Witness the fact that she’s just fluffed the simplest of lines for the third time. ‘Action!’ shouts an exasperated Tarquin as they go for another take.

‘Bertha, your ministrations are of great comfort to me,’ says Charles, perfectly exuding buttoned-up lust.

There’s a pause as Emily gropes for her line.

‘Sir, your happiness is my greatest design.’

‘Cut!’ shouts Tarquin. ‘Emily, it’s desire. Got it? Desire!’

Despite my antipathy, I can’t help but feel sorry for her. Maybe I could offer to step in – I’d have no problem looking at Charles and thinking desire. I can see him giving her an encouraging smile, trying to offset Tarquin’s anger. She gives a dismissive shake of the head and finds her position. This take’s no better. ‘Your happiness is my greatest delight,’ is what comes out, sending Tarquin stratospheric.

‘If she spent less time pissing around chanting and more time learning her lines, we might have some hope of shooting the schedule,’ he hisses at me.

The tension surrounding the two of them is tangible; it’s as though we’re all peering into the monkey enclosure waiting for them to mate. I catch Charles looking at me again and sense his embarrassment at being caught out. I try to silently communicate my support, feeling him trapped by the circle of scrutiny. Luckily, Emily finally pulls it out of the bag, and soon we’re moving on to the next scene. Charles strides off-set, knowing they’ll be a good half hour before the scene’s ready to go. Our eyes meet, yet again, and he comes sidling over.

‘Will you come and talk breeches with me?’ he whispers. ‘Or ditches. Or conkers. Or pretty much anything.’

‘Of course,’ I say, my heart literally skipping.

We hole up in his trailer.

‘Sorry I ruthlessly abducted you,’ he says. ‘Can I compensate you with a cup of plasticky-tasting tea from my charming travel kettle?’ He holds it up jauntily, grinning away, making it physically impossible not to adore him.

‘If you insist,’ I say, curling my feet under me on the squidgy bench seat.

‘I have to say, this job’s pretty grim,’ he says. ‘How is it for you?’

Does he say these things by accident or design? I practise my non-flirtatious poker face.

‘Ooh, pretty grim,’ I say.

‘Tarquin’s a moody fucker,’ he says.

‘And Emily…’ I say, immediately questioning my motives. I don’t want to be a bitch. Quite apart from the karma, you never know how allegiances can switch over the course of a shoot.

‘Mm, Emily,’ he says, and we look at each other, communicating her ghastliness without the need to resort to words. ‘I’m dreading that ridiculous sea rescue,’ he says. ‘Though at least all that cold water should ensure nature doesn’t take its course.’

‘Why would it?’ I ask anxiously.

‘Oh, you’d be amazed,’ he says, laughing. ‘When I was young and reasonably buff’ – *Like you’re not now*, I find myself thinking – ‘my agent signed me up for this dreadful feature film, which turned out to border on pornography. There I was, thinking I was getting my big movie break, and instead I’m flown out to deepest

Czechoslovakia to pretend to hump this carnivorous fifty-something who'd well and truly passed her prime with just a modesty patch to cover… well, my modesty.'

'How did you endure it?' I ask him, unable to take my eyes off him. It's like I'm glued. If he was reading me the phone book, I'd be just as rapt.

'Do you really want to know?' he asks teasingly.

'I really, really do.'

'It's a secret. I might have to whisper it.'

'You can whisper.'

He laughs, moving round the bench seat so he's closer. My heart's beating out a tattoo. I wish he would touch me, even though I know he mustn't. He continues, voice low and conspiratorial.

'So it's six thirty a.m. and I'm literally freezing my bollocks off.'

'And?'

'And, well, obviously nothing's doing.' He's holding my gaze and I know, categorically, that he's thinking that something would be doing if it were me and him. It radiates from him. 'And she's furious, despite the cold and the ungodly hour. So she gets angrier and angrier –'

'Did she slap you?'

'No, way worse. She grazed me, very subtly, with her knee and before you know it I'm standing to attention. The whole crew's staring at my swelling crotch and I'm just *dying* of shame.'

'The indignity!' I say and he grabs my hand, which is lying on the table.

‘Yes, Lulu, the indignity. I’m so glad you understand.’

We stare at each other, silent. He moves his hand upward to stroke the side of my face. I start to turn my face up towards him, then twitch away, suddenly panicky.

‘Tarquin’s not such a bad bloke really!’ I say clumsily, mouth and brain in total disjunct. My mouth’s got way bigger priorities than the absolute nonsense it’s emitting right now.

‘No, I’m sure he’s not,’ agrees Charles fervently, hurriedly sliding out of the bench seat.

‘He’s just stressed and passionate.’

‘Absolutely! Thank God we’re not shooting this weekend. Anyway, I’m sure you’ll need the full forty-eight hours to recover from your Valentine’s Day massacre.’

I open my mouth to invite him and then imagine him turning up on the doorstep with his impossibly beautiful wife. She’ll be one of those devastatingly groomed forty-somethings who make me feel like a schoolgirl with grimy fingernails. Besides, the last thing I need is any more time in his presence, however much I crave it.

‘Yes, maybe,’ I reply stiffly, gathering up my bits and bobs from the table and preparing to leave. I hope he understands why I can’t invite him. What am I talking about? I know he does. Today’s told me we both know exactly what’s going on. Now all we’ve got to do is slam on the brakes and avoid the cliff edge that’s looming ever closer.

Chapter Seven

When the alarm kicks in the next day, I take an executive decision to ignore it. It's an uncomplicated shooting day and for all the team know I'm up to my ears in organza at the costumiers. There's got to be some advantage to being the boss. I fall into a deep coma, only waking up when Alice bounces on the end of my bed at eight a.m.

'Lulu, wake up. You've got a card!'

I force my eyes open to find her thrusting it in my face. My heart's in my mouth, wondering if Charles is going for broke, but then I see how girly the handwriting is.

'You don't have to do this.'

'Do what?' says Alice innocently.

'I know perfectly well it's from you. Getting Jenna to write the envelope doesn't make it any less obvious.'

'OK, OK…' she concedes. 'I just didn't want you to be feeling all bogus about Steve. You've been on another planet these last few days and I know you probably don't want to talk about it, but…'

Steve has been so far from my mind this last week, apart from in the few moments where I've wondered if I ever loved him at all: maybe that whole relationship was just me trying to tick a box. This infatuation with Charles feels infinitely more visceral and intense. I

keep going over the moment when he stroked my face, replaying it again and again in my head. It was so tiny, and yet my whole body remembers every sensation.

'You really didn't have to do that…' I'm trying to admonish Alice, but I'm as grateful as ever to be reminded that she's my staunchest supporter. That's why I know that if I were to tell her about Charles she wouldn't rest till it was done. Not that it's started, of course.

She plucks the tasteful Monet water lilies from my hand and thrusts another card at me.

'You're not the only one with a card,' she says, grinning her head off. 'Look, I'm sure it's from Richard. You've got to let me invite him now. It's really sweet!'

It's a picture of a wizened old woman riding a penny farthing bicycle. Great start. Inside it says, 'I'm speeding towards you. Fancy a drink some time?'

'See: a drink. The clue's in the question. I'm going to drop an invitation through the letter box on the way to work.'

'What if it isn't him?' I ask hopefully, remembering his tirade. 'It's quite normal to ask someone out for a drink in a Valentine's card. It could be anyone.'

'It's definitely him. Oh, don't start up again, just be pleased for me!'

With that, she jumps off my bed and races to the shower. I know better than to argue with her. When Alice is channelling her inner Tigger, there's no room for reason. She's too self-assured and

bouncy. She bounds back into the room ten minutes later, dripping water all over my carpet.

'Are you not going to work today?'

'No, I am, I'm just –'

'Because I think we should get those plastic champagne flutes, even though obviously it's Cava. Although maybe Richard'll give us an upgrade. And we need snackage. How do you feel about sausage rolls? Maybe we could do pigs in blankets…'

On and on she goes, instructions pouring forth. I stop listening somewhere around the sausage rolls, rolling my own sausagey form out of bed and into the shower. Alice carries on regardless through the door, not even stopping when my hairdryer blatantly drowns her out.

'Oh my God, look at the time!' she finally shrieks. 'Are you OK with all of that? I'll get home as early as I can, I promise.' She gives me a tight squeeze. 'I wish there was someone coming for you,' she adds, with the manic glint of a woman sensing the end of a sex drought. 'Steve's so old news! Maybe someone will bring a mystery guest. Should I tell Richard he can bring a mate, as long as he's male?'

I dread to think what depths of awfulness his friends might plumb. Who knows – maybe General Pinochet will make an appearance or that nice Robert Mugabe. I grunt non-committally and let her whirl out of the door, revelling in the sudden peace. The tranquillity lasts for all of ten minutes before I start getting twitchy. That's the problem with being a twin: you're not built to fly solo.

I've been one half of a whole ever since the moment of conception, which renders the supposed delights of solitude a total mystery. Besides, there's no time to waste: I've got a maximum of two hours' grace and a list of instructions as long as my arm.

Venturing out, I'm immediately bombarded by smug girls brandishing bouquets and endless romantic window displays. Lucky old Alice, getting a card – even if it *is* from a psychopath. I can't help speculating about how romantic Charles's morning might have been. He's not due in today, so he'll have had all the time in the world to make Mrs Charles feel adored.

I stamp down on the rolling tide of melancholia, determined not to wallow in self-pity. I should treat Valentine's Day as a useful reminder that he's not available, case closed. I push him from my mind, concentrating fiercely on the reams of tasks that Lance Corporal Alice Godwin has set me. I buy a case of pink Cava to offer people on arrival, even though the price suggests it's most likely revolting (hopefully it'll offend Richard's refined palate so much he'll retreat to the off-licence to shower himself in Dom Pérignon). I find twinkly red fairy lights to string around the door, and even risk snapping some twigs off a neighbour's box hedge to stand in for mistletoe. I'm officially the patron saint of love, even though two months without sex has left me suspecting a blow job requires the cunning use of a pair of bellows.

The heavens open as I climb into the car, the driving rain making light work of my feeble windscreen wipers. The journey takes way longer as a result, and I arrive on-set damp and flustered.

‘Thank God you’re here!’ hisses Gareth. ‘They’ve had to junk the courtyard exteriors because of the rain so we’re back in the library.’

‘Are we?’ I squeak. ‘So, what, they’ve called Charles in?’

‘Obviously,’ says Gareth, clocking my horrified expression. This will be the first time I’ve seen him since the face-stroking incident and I look like shit. I’ve tied my unwashed hair into an unflattering ponytail so I can go full-steam ahead with the straighteners later, and my combat trousers make me look like I’m touring with an All Saints tribute band. ‘Is that a problemo?’

‘Of course not.’

‘OK, sorry I spoke. It just seems like you’ve got some bizarre issue with the poor man.’

‘Well, I haven’t. In fact, I’ll go and talk him through his wardrobe right now.’

Big mistake. Now I’ve made such a big deal of it I’ll have to go straight there, with no chance of a covert rummage in the wardrobe bus for a less hideous outfit (although getting wedged in the door of his caravan in a crinoline might prove to be the most embarrassing faux pas so far). Walking towards his caravan, I decide I’ve got to shoot for an air of cool indifference. The face stroking may have been nothing more than thespy chumminess and, even if it wasn’t, he’s got nothing to offer me but a world of pain.

I rap sharply on the door, give him a crisp hello, and hide my lower half behind the door as I rattle out the various elements of today’s wardrobe like a round of machine-gun fire. Charles stares at me, expression unreadable, unable to get a word in edgeways. As

soon as I see him I can feel myself melting inside. I'm desperate to tell him my officiousness is no more than a strategy, but I know I've got to try and resist the poisoned apple.

'So that just about covers it,' I tell him, sixty-second monologue complete. 'I'll leave you to it.'

'Are you horribly busy today?' he says, cocking his head endearingly. He's looking a bit scruffy in his washed-out jeans and crumpled shirt, but it only adds to his appeal. His clothes look so thrown on that it seems as though he could throw them straight back off again without a second's thought.

'Yes, very,' I tell him emphatically, determined to make a run for it before he sees my bizarre garb. Even if he were consumed by lust, I can't imagine any man wanting to peel off these combat trousers. 'Let's catch up later,' I add, determined to ensure that we don't.

'Lulu!' he calls after me. 'Can I grab you for a sec?'

There's no escape. I slink round the door sheepishly. 'I've got something for you,' he says, taking in my peculiar look. If I hadn't made so much effort up till now, it wouldn't matter. I must seem like such a loser: no one with a sniff of love in their life would be dressed like this on Valentine's Day.

'Have you got something that needs sewing?'

'I haven't been storing up mending for you!' he says, laughing. 'I wanted to give you this for your house-warming.' He pulls out a bottle of champagne with a flourish. 'To say thank you for being the one person who makes this job bearable.'

'Oh!' I say, blushing stupidly. 'You didn't have to do that.'

‘I know, but I wanted to.’

‘Thank you, Charles,’ I say, a little too heartfelt. ‘Of course, if you want to come…’ Why did I say that?

‘I wish I could,’ he says ruefully, ‘but there’s bugger all chance of me slipping the domestic leash. You’ll just have to think of me when you drink it.’ He’s giving me the bottle, keeping hold of it a little too long so that our fingers wrap around it, dangerously close.

‘OK, it’s a deal,’ I tell him then mentally lash myself for overstepping the mark.

I force myself to leave before the heat’s turned up any higher, and spend the rest of the day hiding out in the wardrobe caravan working on the look of later episodes. I feel like I’ve drunk a vat of coffee, all jittery and distracted, a state which makes me miss Zelda all the more. She’d know there was something wrong and a dose of her tough love would instantly shake me back to normality. Instead I’m lost in a mental maze, one minute excited, the next desolate.

At six I decide it’s time to quit, internally awarding myself the prize for slacker of the year. The shoot won’t wrap till at least eight, but if I carried on working in my keyed-up state the parlourmaids would end up in latex bondage gear by episode nine. A judiciously proffered Cadbury’s Creme Egg means that Gareth’s forgiven me and promises to bring his unbeatable Gaydar to bear on Rufus later. I come through the door to find Alice relegating the fairy lights to the fireplace.

‘What are you doing?’ I ask her. ‘I turned over most of North London to find them.’

‘Yeah, they’re great,’ she says. ‘I just wonder if it’ll all look a bit more sophisticated if they’re snaked round the grate.’

‘Since when did we start throwing sophisticated parties?’ I ask, exasperated. ‘Themes are just an excuse to camp it up.’ She looks sheepish. ‘Oh, so he’s coming, is he?’ I continue.

‘Be pleased for me!’ she implores. ‘I dropped a note through and he texted to say he’d love to.’

‘OK, OK, I’m pleased. But you’re not turning our pink extravaganza into some kind of dreary, minimalist wake. And you’re not leaving me with Jenna –’

‘Did someone mention my name?’ trills Jenna, barrelling down the stairs.

‘Oh, hi…’ I say guiltily, but she hasn’t heard a thing.

‘I thought you might need some help,’ she says, all fake altruistic. ‘So I came back after school with Alice.’ Yeah, right. I know her game. Jenna will do almost anything to ensure she gets Alice’s undivided attention. I’m surprised she didn’t just have done with it and turn up for breakfast. That said, she’s brandishing stickers for what is quite an inspired party game.

‘I do it with the kids at school,’ she says. ‘They all charge around the hall with names on their chests looking for their other half. Perfect training for life!’

How can she possibly think that brainwashing 6-year-old girls that they’ll only be complete when they find their mate is an admirable exercise? I skip the argument and pore over the stickers.

I pick up the sheet. ‘So who’s Henry the Eighth’s opposite number?’

‘Well, there’s the fun!’ she says excitedly. ‘There’s Catherine Parr and Anne Boleyn: it could go either way.’

‘Well, we need some promiscuous women,’ I say, brandishing a pen. ‘It’s not fair if only the men get a lucky dip. There, Elizabeth Taylor. We can have Mike Todd and Richard Burton.’

‘Who the hell’s going to want to be Mike Todd?’ says Alice reasonably. ‘Even if Mike looks like George Clooney and Richard looks like Christopher Biggins, there’s a sense of destiny about who she’ll go for.’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ I tell her. ‘What we need to do is make sure we’ve got the best stickers. This might be the party where I finally get to be Roland.’

‘Of course you can be Roland!’ says Alice. ‘I’m sorted now Richard’s coming, so I can just focus on finding you a really hot Janet. Who do you wanna be, Jenna?’

‘So here’s the thing,’ she says melodramatically. ‘I’ve actually invited someone. You won’t believe how I met him.’ I bet I will. Jenna leaves no stone unturned, however fetid. ‘I was sitting in that coffee shop in Highbury after school, doing my marking, right opposite William Hill.’

‘Who’s William Hill?’ asks Alice.

‘William Hill the bookies?’ I ask, incredulous.

‘Exactly!’ says Jenna. ‘I told you you wouldn’t believe it. Anyway, this gorgeous guy parks his car on a single yellow and goes dashing

in, but *as soon* as he's through the door this traffic warden comes out of nowhere.' Let's see, who'd make the worst party guest: traffic warden or gambling addict? 'So I go dashing out and tell him that Colin's only just parked –'

'Colin?' says Alice. Jenna's tone of loving familiarity suggests that she and Colin are at least three years into a happy marriage.

'Yes, that's his name. Still, you can't have everything! Anyway, the traffic warden's absolutely merciless, won't back off, so I have to go into the bookies and try to find him.'

'*Why* did you have to go and find him?' I ask her.

'It was my civic duty, Lulu,' she says sternly. 'Those traffic wardens are money-grabbing parasites. So, anyway, I can't see him at first, but then I find him right in the middle of a crowd of men cheering on this horse. You can imagine how out of place I looked. He really loves racing, so he was a bit annoyed with me interrupting, but when I explained he was ever so grateful. We dash back out there, just as Mr Meter Maid's starting to write out the ticket, and stop him in the nick of time.'

'Then what?' asks Alice nervously. 'Have you actually been on a date?'

'We parked up round the corner and then he wanted to go back to find out how Bruno's Mate had done.'

'What, the horse?' I ask, fervently hoping the story doesn't conclude with a threesome.

'Yes, but he'd lost so we had to put a couple of other bets on. It turns out to be great, great fun – we should all go some time.'

Luckily she's too involved in her narrative to notice the lack of enthusiasm. 'Eventually this handsome great stallion won, so then Colin asked if he could spend his winnings on buying me a thank-you drink. Actually they were our winnings, because when he explained how it worked I put quite a bit of money up. Anyway, because of the biggish stake there was enough for a bottle of champagne, although come to think of it we'd lost a fair amount before that.' Jenna pauses, visibly perplexed by the maths: clearly no one's explained to her that bookies are running a business. 'So we got really quite tipsy, outside that pub round the corner.'

'The Warnock's Head?' I ask. Spit and sawdust doesn't begin to convey its putridness. 'Were some of your new friends from William Hill there too?'

'Don't tease me, Lulu! Besides, I was too busy snogging Colin to notice. He wanted me to come home with him, but I told him I wasn't that kind of girl.'

'So have you seen him since?' asks Alice, open-mouthed with horror.

'No, that was Wednesday, so I thought why not just wait till Valentine's Day and have a date right here. I'm not sure if he knows it's Valentine's though: I didn't want to mention it in case I seemed needy.'

'No, quite right,' says Alice.

'I've got him a card though,' she adds brightly. She pulls out a child's birthday card, with a horse on it. 'I've converted it. It looks so like our stallion,' she says, gazing at it with a beatific smile.

‘Great!’ says Alice, lost for words for what might be the first time in human history. Unable to summon up a response, I decide it’s time to devise an outfit.

The ‘what to wear’ conundrum hits home particularly hard now there’s a new love interest to consider. Truth be told, it’s an eternal dilemma. When we were little we’d revel in wearing exactly the same outfits, feeling smugly insulated by our novelty status. As teenagers we’d fight over who’d get to buy the choicest items, hidebound by our similar taste. I decide that dressing down is simply not an option for my own party, and that the total lack of chemistry/mutual dislike between me and Richard means that Alice is already on safe ground. Feeling a bit rebellious, aware no one’s coming for me, I go for a silky black jumpsuit that I ran up for Zelda a couple of productions ago. We never got the actress it was intended for to go for it, so eventually I took it home. I top it off with a shower of costume jewellery and glittery eye shadow, hoping the ultimate effect is more Bond villainess than podgy cat.

As I’m piling on the slap, I struggle to comprehend the horror of Jenna’s latest pull. Is this what it comes to if you’ve failed to close the deal prior to thirty-five? I can’t waste any more time pointlessly fixating on someone else’s husband: I need to find one of my own. Love Alice as I do, I don’t want us to grow into some kind of aging end-of-the-pier freak show, finishing each other’s sentences and reminiscing about the days when we had actual menfolk. I change my cutesy pumps for a pair of scarily high heels and rack my brains for any guests who might be Janet-worthy, but no one springs to

mind. Just then the doorbell goes and I find myself harbouring an insane delusion that the perfect man has been magnetized to the threshold by the force of my desire. But it's only Rufus.

'Hi, sis,' he says, giving me an awkward peck on the cheek. 'I just brought beer: does that make me *persona non grata*?' He delivers this with the kind of ironic eyebrow wiggle that makes me both melt with sibling affection and despair of him ever getting his end away. Not to mention the beer, which is some kind of Lithuanian lager that even Oliver Reed might've baulked at drinking thirty-six hours into a merciless bender. Rufus rejects it himself, plumping instead for a glass of the pink Cava.

'Is it getting you in the romantic mood?' asks Alice, all excited about her matchmaking. 'I really think you and Katy might go for each other, particularly now we've got the stickers. Do you want to be Rasputin?'

'But don't you always say she's a social outcast?' pipes up Jenna, just as I'm trying to find out who the hell Rasputin's perfect partner is. Luckily Rufus isn't listening to either of us.

'The thing is, I've actually invited someone of my own.'

My pleasure at hearing that Rufus might be about to pop his cherry is immediately marred by selfish paranoia about being the only person in the entire world, or at least in this kitchen, without a sniff of sex on this most galling of days.

'That's fantastic!' shrieks Alice. Who is… who are they?'

We're both frozen with anticipation, poised to be as positive as possible if his date's called Kevin.

‘Dinah. Her name’s Dinah.’

‘Dinah!’ says Alice. ‘Where did you meet her?’

Dinah turns out to be a trainee press officer at Rufus’s company. Six months out of a girl-heavy English degree, she’s been plunged into the male maelstrom of Panic Gaming, and of all the men she could’ve picked she’s plumped for our brother.

‘So have you actually kissed her?’ I ask bluntly, worried that he might be living in some kind of courtly love fantasy world, straight from the plot of one of his own games.

‘Yeah,’ he says, blushing so violently that the smattering of pimples on his chin illuminate like the Northern Lights. ‘It was *amazing*! We went on this away day in Milton Keynes and when we were on the train home she just grabbed me.’ Looking at his glowing expression you’d think that Milton Keynes had just unseated Paris as the city of love.

‘I’m so, so pleased for you!’ says Jenna, who’s always thrilled to have her faith in romance restored. She leans in with an encouraging smile. ‘So what’s her secret?’

‘Oh, you’ll understand when you meet her. She’s just got this – this incredible warmth.’

Alice and I are drawn away by a knock at the door, leaving Jenna to carry on the interrogation. It’s a gaggle of our school friends, who immediately demand to know which one of us is which. I love the fact that we’re still in London, still in touch with some of the gang we grew up with. A lot of our past has gone, with Mum no longer here and Dad on the other side of the world, so keeping hold of

fragments of our formative years helps me to feel we've got roots. Even my first ever snog, Chris Tucker, has made an appearance, spooking me with his newly balding pate. It's a crushing reminder we're none of us Dorian Gray; how long have I got before my first grey pubic hair makes an appearance?

There's also Amanda and Naomi, who were our permanent partners in crime. As I get them a drink and a sticker, Naomi asks *sotto voce* what the available man count is like.

'We just need some guests, full stop,' I tell her anxiously, attaching Prince William to her chest (not literally). It's nearly nine and the head count is still in single figures. But as soon as I say it, I lift the curse. The doorbell starts pealing out relentlessly, with guest after guest tumbling through the door. I'm touched by how many people who I've worked with in the past pitch up. Sometimes it's nice to feel appreciated by people who appreciate me for me, not just as one half of a double act. There are also hordes of teachers, lots of our university friends and a good cross-section of people I don't even recognize who've come along for the ride. A case in point is Docker, a druggy-seeming friend of my university pal Jezza. Known as 'Jezza Plus Six' for his compulsion to travel everywhere with an entourage, he's brought a whole gang of mates who look like the bastard offspring of the Stone Roses. They all have one-word names and dirty fingernails and waste no time setting up the huge record decks they've brought with them.

'Jezza, I told you not to do this,' I hiss, spotting Alice looking distinctly unimpressed.

‘Sorry, Lulu,’ he says, about to intervene, but is stopped in his tracks by Alice launching into Docker.

‘I think everyone’s quite happy with Frank Sinatra,’ she tells him. ‘We’ve got a Valentine’s theme going on…’

‘Yeah, no, I get that,’ he says, barely looking up from his scarily huge box of records. ‘It’s just that it’s nearly ten o’clock and it’s about time we gave your do a bit of a shot in the arm.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she says, motioning me over. ‘But you’ve got no right to set the agenda in my house. Unplug those decks right now.’

I don’t mess with Alice when she’s angry, but Docker’s more fearless than me and simply drowns her out with the opening bars of ‘Step On’ by the Happy Mondays. An unexpected cheer goes up from the assembled masses and there’s a sudden flurry of dodgy dancing that was entirely absent during ‘Come Fly With Me’. I smile at Alice and give her a ‘who knew?’ shrug, but she ignores me, stomping off to the kitchen in a strop. I understand why she’s pissed off, but the party’s suddenly feeling way more fun, and I’m not sure I can deal with her righteous indignation. Instead I have a try at a dodgy shuffle with Jezza and even agree to a tequila shot proffered by Naomi.

The party soon becomes so packed that the entire house feels like a mass game of Sardines. Worried about Alice’s mood, I steel myself to seek her out, finding her wedged in the corner of the kitchen talking to a petite blonde in an expensive-looking wrap dress.

‘Lulu, meet Dinah,’ she says distractedly.

‘Oh, hi!’ I say, desperate to find out more about the woman who’s lured Rufus out of lifelong romantic hibernation. Dinah extends a perfect little paw towards me.

‘Lulu, what a treat to meet you!’ Her glossy locks are swept up in a swishy ponytail, exposing high, elegant cheekbones as white and unblemished as a virgin ski slope. She’s so pristine that she feels new, and yet there’s something about her that’s the opposite of young.

‘That guy has got such a nerve!’ spits Alice, before I have a chance to undertake a full-scale interrogation of our potential sister-in-law.

‘I don’t know, it’s kind of perking things up.’ Her neurosis is irritating me: I know she’s probably right, but I wish she could just let go for once in her life.

‘Perking things up?’ says an outraged Alice, as the opening bars of ‘Fool’s Gold’ shake the house to its very foundations. ‘We live in a conservation area! Most of our neighbours fought in the Boer War. Those handwritten notes we put through their doors aren’t going to cut it if we’re blaring out music all night.’

‘God, Alice, take a chill pill!’ I say, tequila making me reckless. I look embarrassedly at Dinah, who’s following our whole exchange with keen interest.

‘Could I offer you a soupçon of Laurent-Perrier Rosé?’ she asks Alice. ‘Just to calm your nerves?’

‘Oh, Dinah, you shouldn’t have brought something that posh!’ I tell her. ‘It’s incredibly generous.’

‘It’s a pleasure,’ she says with a little smile. ‘No harm in pushing the boat out. Anyway, Cava tends to give me a bit of a headache.’

‘Oh,’ I say, ‘well, I for one would love a glass.’

Rufus appears at her elbow, lank hair sweaty and tousled. Dinah gives him a little peck and casts him a questioning glance.

‘Sorry, I was just wigging out to the Stone Roses. Man, your mate’s got some amazing tunes.’ I give Alice an ‘I told you so’ look and she gives a shrug of concession.

‘OK,’ she says, like I’m Docker’s keeper. ‘But please get him to turn it down a bit. I can’t relax while it’s that loud.’

I suppose the Jezza connection does technically make him my responsibility. I fight my way through the teeming hordes who’ve squashed themselves around his decks and beg him to play ‘She’s Like the Wind’, Alice’s favourite song from her favourite film, but he makes it quite clear his decks don’t do *Dirty Dancing*.

A few glasses of Cava down the road, I’m letting it all wash over me. I’m catching up with people I haven’t seen in an age, not even worrying about the fact that my life’s a love desert. Alice has cheered up no end since closing time delivered Richard fresh from the off-licence. She’s been glued to his side ever since, ignoring pretty much everyone in favour of hanging out in the corner of the garden. It’s not just lust: if Alice doesn’t feel in control, she likes to get as far away from the situation as possible. Which I guess leaves me in charge, but all I seem capable of doing is making pink drinks. As Amanda and I mulch strawberries in the blender for yet another round of margaritas, I’m assailed by a short, freckly redhead.

‘Batman!’ he says triumphantly, reaching his stunted arm up to clink glasses with me.

‘Good for you,’ I say. ‘Who are you here with?’

‘No, Batman!’ he says.

‘I’ve seen your label, me and Alice made them.’

‘You’re Robin.’

‘No, I’m Roland. It’s a long story, and it’s kind of stupid…’

‘No, you’re Robin. We’re Batman and Robin.’

And the horror is that it’s true. Drunk and love-struck, Jenna’s managed to write ‘Robin’ not ‘Roland’ on my label.

‘So you’re the mistress of labels, are you?’ asks the lascivious midget. ‘I’m privileged.’

‘No, the pleasure’s all mine,’ I say, desperately over-compensating for the fact that not even a million-pound cheque and a yacht would persuade me to so much as hold hands with him. I try to draw Amanda into the conversation, but he’s having none of it. Smirking away to herself, she goes in search of Humphrey Bogart. The midget refuses to tell me his name, insisting I call him Batman and rendering it impossible to make the kind of bland small talk that prefigures a hasty retreat.

‘So, Robin,’ he sleazes, ‘what would your superpower be?’

‘Um, invisibility?’

‘Oh, so you like to watch?’ he grins, wilfully misunderstanding me. All manners desert me when I spot Gareth stalking around the party, inspecting people’s outfits. I mutter something unintelligible and beat a hasty retreat.

‘I would’ve told you he wasn’t a fag, even without him having acquired a pop-up heterosexual to carry around,’ says Gareth, scrutinizing Rufus.

‘She could be a beard,’ I counter.

‘Don’t be absurd: he’s smitten!’ says Gareth and, looking over, I can see he’s right. Rufus is staring down at Dinah as she talks, not even attempting to join the conversation, happy to simply bask in her proximity. When she glances back at him, he instantly tries to adjust his expression, but can’t quite wipe the lovesick puppy look from his face. She reaches up and strokes his cheek and I think how maybe she just gets him. She understands how entirely without guile he is, how loyal, and isn’t put off by his gauche clumsiness.

I stare a little too long, feeling wistful.

‘You’re well and truly overdue, my girl,’ says Gareth. ‘It’s a shame the only remotely desirable candidate on “Last Carriage” is married with two point four children.’

‘Do you think he’s desirable?’ I ask in the kind of high, quavery voice that makes it quite obvious I’m being disingenuous (particularly as I haven’t even stopped to ask who he means).

‘Christ, yes,’ says Gareth. ‘Distinctly fantasy worthy. Talking of which, I’m promised to a threesome with a couple of Brazilians in Swiss Cottage. If it turns out to be a crasher, I’ll come back.’

‘Oh, OK,’ I say, wondering what would qualify it as a ‘crasher’. If it turned out they just wanted a third alto for a three-part harmony perhaps?

I walk Gareth to the door, only to find a furious-looking Mr Simkins standing at the threshold.

'Mr Simkins, how lovely to see you. Would you like to join us for a drink?' He stares at me with an expression of impotent fury. 'Um, probably not. I'm very sorry if we're making too much noise. I'll go and turn it down right now.'

'Sorry simply isn't good enough!' he says, leaning heavily on his stick and pushing himself up to his full height. As he's drawing breath, I spot an insanely handsome man putting on his jacket in preparation to leave. A jacket with a neon label on it saying 'Cock'. What a nightmare double bind. I want to shout from the rooftops that I'm his Robin and simultaneously ensure that Mr Simkins doesn't get us ejected from the street for having a swingers' party. As my head swivels back and forth, Cock mercifully decides to push his way back into the kitchen. By now our esteemed neighbour is in full flow.

'I have lived in this street since 1960, which is, may I say, one of the most desirable addresses in North London. In all those years, we have never experienced this level of noise and disruption. I must ask you to instruct your young friends to don their coats and make their way to the Underground. It's entirely unacceptable!'

As I grope for a reply, Gareth jumps in. 'Louise certainly didn't intend to inconvenience you, I'm sure. I give you my word that she and I will ensure that the party winds up immediately.' Vaguely mollified, Mr Simkins gives a guttural harrumph and hobbles back to his house.

‘Oh Christ,’ I say. ‘How are we going to get everyone out? It’s not even midnight.’

Smooth and capable, Gareth manages to force Docker to turn the music down to a dull roar, and starts telling people we’re wrapping up. But no one seems interested in leaving and I can’t find Alice to help.

‘Damn it,’ says Gareth, peeling off his coat. ‘I can see there’s no chance of Gareth getting his rocks off tonight. This is exactly why my Christmas drinks are six till eight.’

‘Oh no, you don’t have to stay…’

But his mind’s made up. Steadfast to the last, he’s determined not to abandon me with the rabble. God knows it’s getting pretty Bacchanalian around here. The fake mistletoe’s going down a storm: right now Jenna’s playing tonsil tennis with… hang on, with Chris. When she comes up for air, I drag her aside.

‘What happened to Colin?’

‘Oh, Colin. It’s a long story.’ Oh no, not one of Jenna’s long stories. ‘He’s kind of been arrested. But me and Noddy have really hit it off!’

‘Kind of’ arrested? You have to hand it to Jenna; she’s grabbed a ‘Big Ears’ label and moved straight on. Still, if you can’t beat them, join them.

‘Come on, Gareth,’ I implore. ‘Let’s give it another twenty minutes. I’ve got to find Cock.’

I scour the kitchen, but there’s no sign of him. There are some scary-looking shapes in our bedrooms, all of which I decline to

investigate. I've got no idea who he is, and asking random guests if they've seen Cock is just asking for trouble. I try to describe him to Gareth, but 'tall, dark and incredibly buff with a label saying Cock' fails to convince.

'He's clearly a mirage,' says Gareth. 'We need to concentrate on our ejection strategy, not our erection strategy.'

'Blah, blah,' I say, dragging him back upstairs to try the bathroom. I know he's right; the music's creeping up again and I need to do my duty, but I just can't face being the big bad wolf. Right on cue, the doorbell gives a determined peal: could Simkins have returned with an octogenarian army?

'Lulu!' shouts Amanda.

'I'm here,' I whisper through the banisters. 'Tell him we're kicking everyone out.'

'It's a policeman!' she says. 'He's asking for Alice by name.'

'She's got to be somewhere. I can't face it and, anyway, she's way less drunk than me.'

'I know where she is,' says Amanda, 'she's in the bathroom, but she's in no fit state. Jenna's projectile vomited over herself and about three other people. Alice is cleaning her up. It won't look good – you'll have to go.'

Typical. Jenna is such a bloody liability. Gareth straightens my hair and rips off my label.

'You can do this, Lulu. Imagine you're on-set, doing your thing.'

Despite his encouragement, I'm shaking like a leaf. I don't want us to end up evicted with an ASBO. I descend the stairs slowly,

counting them to try and encourage sobriety.

'Hello, I'm Alice Godwin,' I say, sticking my hand out with faux confidence, only to discover it's not the first time I've deluded this particular policeman. Oh my God, is he going to throw my drunken arse into the cells on a charge of identity fraud? How can this be happening?

'Don't even bother to speak if you don't want to,' he says, much to my relief. At least I've got time to work on my defence. 'There's no excuse for me pitching up, but for some reason I can't get you out of my head. Did I just say that out loud?' He grins sheepishly.

'Can't you?' I say warily, wondering where this is going. Gareth's eyes are out on stalks, which reminds me just how buff PC Alistair Doo-Da actually is. I shoo Gareth away and try to focus.

'No, I can't. You were dead cheeky when I pulled you over, but you were also dead sexy. Did you get my card?'

'Your card?' I pause, catching up. 'Oh, your card! Yes, thank you so much. I think, though, that picture wasn't quite the look I was aiming for.'

'It's the kind of speed you should be aiming for.'

'Yeah, yeah. Blah, blah. Highway Code, chevrons, pelican crossings. Got it.' I wish I could be this natural when I actually feel it for a man. With Charles I'm a gibbering idiot at least ninety per cent of the time.

'Point taken. I'll shut up,' he laughs. 'And you're well within your rights to report me, but why don't you come out for dinner instead?'

‘Do you wanna come in?’ I ask, playing for time. He is intensely, freshly handsome and his persistence is flattering. Although will having a policeman on site help or hinder our chances of an ASBO?

‘Can’t be done, I’m on duty. If you want to see me again you’ll have to come on a date. What do you reckon?’

I must want it. I need to want it. It’s no good chasing imaginary Cock and pining for another woman’s property. He looks at me with such warm directness that I hand over my number and tell him to call me. Just then Gareth reappears at my elbow, oozing aristocratic charm. Ali and I give him a rough appraisal of the situation, overlapping all over the place.

‘God, how devilishly romantic!’ says Gareth. ‘And how opportune. We so need your help.’

Gareth insists he comes in and helps us to persuade the army of guests that the party is well and truly over. Luckily no one name checks me and Alice stays hidden away on vomit detail, so my lie remains intact. He takes a single gulp of the wine I proffer and hands me back the glass, heading for the door.

‘I told you, I’m driving.’

‘But you could breathalyse yourself!’ I say.

‘I think I’ve broken enough rules for one day. Wednesday?’

‘I think so.’

‘No need to sound so enthusiastic.’

‘I’m just a bit rusty, that’s all.’

‘Find that hard to believe,’ he replies, giving me a subtly appraising look. He’s cute, no question. But he’s not Charles.

He kisses me on the cheek and zooms off into the night, leaving me tipsy and befuddled on the doorstep. Was that the most or least romantic Valentine's Day ever? I guess I'll know soon enough.

Chapter Eight

The next morning I wake to a head that throbs like a lawnmower going full throttle and a house which looks like it's been hit by a hurricane. Alice has been up for a good couple of hours and is noisily loading glasses into the dishwasher. When I emerge fuzzily, she pops an Alka-Seltzer into a glass without even being asked.

'Morning, dearest,' she says, smiling in mock pity.

'Don't start!' I say.

'I didn't say a word!'

'You didn't have to. Anyway, you're the one who's best friends with an *Exorcist* reject.'

'And you're the one whose friends think central Islington is central Ibiza.'

I put the kettle on grumpily, searching for a way to change the subject. I can't remember the last time I was this hung-over.

'So what gives with Richard? I thought he stayed over?' The last time I saw him he was disappearing into her room at about two a.m. after Jenna had finally been deemed sober enough to climb into a cab unaided.

'Oh God,' says Alice, suddenly vulnerable. 'I think I've really screwed it up.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, we were at about second base, I s’pose –’

‘What, hiking in the hills, but not foraging in the forest?’

‘Yeah, roughly, and then I said I thought that was about far enough, and he got a bit, I don’t know…’

‘Angry?’ I posit, a little too quickly.

‘No, not angry exactly – frustrated.’

How is that different? I wonder to myself.

‘You know, it’s kind of flattering that he wanted me so much.’

‘So then what happened?’

‘He said he couldn’t stand being so pent up and he went home. He must’ve really liked me to send the card and now I’ve completely fucked it up.’

I don’t have the heart to tell her the real story behind the mystery missive. Seeing how crestfallen she looks, I suddenly feel every bit as furious as Richard: how dare he make my sister feel this way?

‘You had every right to say no to him, and if he’s going to try and make you feel bad about it, it just goes to show he’s a total dick. And if he’s a total dick, it’s better to know now. Even if it means we have to live on Lambrusco from Costcutter, it’ll be a small price to pay.’

Alice raises a tiny smile then goes back to looking downcast.

‘It was just really nice to feel excited about someone again. I know Jenna’s track record is a bit hit and miss, but at least she keeps signing up.’

‘Please don’t suggest we start using her as a romantic role model. That way madness lies.’

‘She’s just lonely, Lulu. We’ve got each other, but she’s… talking of which, when are you off on location so I know to book myself up?’

‘Very end of the month. A week in Ripon: pity me.’

‘I do, I do, but at least you’ll have Gareth with you to paint Ripon red.’

She wanders off to hoover up the layer of ground-in crisps which covers the living-room carpet, leaving me to contemplate how different this job is from the work hard/play hard assignments of yore. Quite apart from the twin stresses of the dwindling budget and the lusciousness of the leading man, being the boss is starting to get to me. Natural authority doesn’t seem to come naturally, which is why I was perfectly happy as second-in-command.

Alice and I don’t even bother to leave the house for the rest of the day. Instead we veg out on the sofa watching *Dirty Dancing*, with Alice trying to persuade me that there’s a case for texting Richard. My admission that the Valentine’s card was a case of mistaken identity leaves her gutted, but I need to do whatever it takes to persuade her to steer clear. I distract her with the vicarious thrill of Ali turning up on the doorstep, and then suffer her badgering me to go on the date I’m determined to cancel.

‘Oh, go on, Lulu, what have you got to lose?’

She’s right, of course, but I’m stupidly fearful that I’ll sit opposite him feeling nothing because he’s not Charles. I can’t stand how sad

that'll be, how trapped I'll feel by an infatuation that cannot bear fruit. I come so close to telling her everything, but I don't want to pass on the melancholia that's plaguing me. Much better I nip it in the bud in private.

'Maybe,' I say neutrally. 'But what do I do? Admit that I lied to him or carry on undercover?'

'You could give one date a go, see if you like him, and if you do come clean. That way you can see if he's some kind of authoritarian fascist before you risk it. You deserve some fun, Lulu, you're working your arse off.'

'I guess I could counter-claim that he stalked me,' I say, gradually persuading myself until I'm struck by an image of Charles's hand gently reaching towards my face. 'Oh, I just can't be bothered.'

'Why are you being so stubborn?' says Alice, understandably exasperated.

'It'll be bad enough pretending I'm you, without the added complication of us then having virtually the same name. And can any good come out of a relationship built on a tissue of lies?'

And there's Charles again, doggedly invading my mental space. A tissue of lies is the only possible basis *we* could spring from, which is what makes it a non-starter. Besides, my strong moral code would never allow it. I might have to retreat to bed with a shot of bromide, three Hail Marys and the Girl Guide handbook.

'Stop being so melodramatic,' counters Alice. 'He might find it funny. He might even get off on having had so much power over you at the outset.'

‘Yeah, cos that’d be a good sign,’ I shout, heading upstairs to brush my teeth.

Sunday doesn’t remotely resemble a day of rest. I spend the whole day working on designs while Alice takes off to the cinema with Jenna. Time alone simply doesn’t suit me and soon I’m feeling royally sorry for myself again. My belief is that Sundays should be spent gaily romping through parks with a devoted man and a well-kempt Red Setter, despite the fact I’ve never achieved anything remotely approaching that level of carefree romantic optimism. My Sundays with Steve would most likely involve a drunken lunch with his scary professional friends, in which I’d end up feeling like a pointless curiosity – one step up from a hirsute potter in a self-knitted beret. Now I find myself pining to spend Sunday with another woman’s husband, while an available hottie goes to waste. Suitably chastened by my internal lecture, I send Ali a text. Of course, it’s not that simple. What I actually do is agonize for a good half hour about what to send, and then call Alice.

‘I’m so glad,’ she yelps. ‘And, Lulu, Richard texted me. We’re going for a drink on Tuesday, so it wasn’t a disaster after all.’

‘Great,’ I say, aiming my voice upwards. I can’t risk saying anything else, so I plough on with my dilemma. ‘How’s this: Good to see you last night. If the dinner invitation was for real, I’d love to accept.’

‘Oh no, Lulu,’ says Jenna.

‘Sorry, I’m driving, should’ve said you were on loudspeaker,’ chips in Alice. ‘I think that sounds great.’

‘No, no, no,’ chants Jenna, North London’s self-appointed answer to Barbara Cartland. ‘It should be more playful. How about: Hi, Ali, I’d love you to take me, full stop, for dinner, exclamation mark.’

Where to start? ‘Exclamation marks are the scourge of text messages,’ I snap. ‘They’re only one step up from emoticons.’

‘Fine,’ says Jenna huffily. ‘But you must admit you’re a bit out of practice. In the world of dating it’s important to sell yourself.’

Hmm, prostitution. Even for Jenna, I think that might be a step too far. I hang up, send the text and feel proud of my maturity. Charles, Schmarles: he’s nothing to me.

But come Monday morning, he’s everything again. The entire day is devoted to the sea rescue, for which I’ve created a particularly fetching pair of cream breeches, designed to be worn with a tight, ruffled shirt. Outfit donned, he seeks me out in the wardrobe caravan.

‘Will I do?’ he asks cheekily. ‘Am I as Lulu intended?’

Oh God, isn’t he just. My Wednesday-night assignation with Ali looms ever closer, but right now it seems utterly irrelevant. There’s only me, Charles and the all too snug-fitting breeches.

‘You’ll absolutely do. Are they comfortable?’

Have I effectively just asked how his penis is feeling? I detect a crimson blush creeping up my cheeks.

‘They’re shipshape.’

‘Oh, good. Good, that’s… perfect.’ Stop talking, Lulu, stop talking about his penis.

‘Will you be on-set for any last-minute adjustments?’ he asks innocently.

‘Er, of course… I’ll – I’ll see you there.’

Utterly confused how to interpret it all, I blunder my way towards Emily’s caravan. She’s a one-woman cold shower if ever I met one.

‘There you are!’ she whinges. ‘These fucking corsets. I dunno how they lived in the Victorian times, I really don’t. Briony’s laced me up so tightly, my nipples can hardly breathe.’

I think about giving her a brief lesson in anatomy, before deciding I’ve had quite enough conversations about cast members’ erogenous zones for one day.

‘Here, let me see if I can loosen you up a bit,’ I tell her, fiddling with the laces. ‘I hate the water, if I’m honest,’ she says as I let the dress out. ‘I hope it’s only going to be a couple of takes.’

Yeah, right, cos that’s really likely between Tarquin’s auteur pretensions and her inability to remember the simplest of lines.

‘Do you like him, Lulu?’ she asks.

‘Yes, he’s lovely,’ I respond, before my self-censor mechanism kicks in. ‘I really like him.’

‘I just think he’s a bit up himself. All that “Let me shoot it from the top of a tree” bollocks. I know everyone thinks I’m some jumped-up soap star, but at least on “Enders” they just get through it, job done.’

‘Oh, Tarquin!’ I say.

‘Yeah, who’d you think I meant?’ she fires back. ‘Charles?’ she asks, a sly smile playing around her lips.

‘Tarquin, Charles… they’re both great,’ I bluster. ‘Anyway, I must see how everyone else is doing.’

‘It’s just me and Charles today, Lulu, nobody else.’

‘Exactly! I’m going to go and check on him.’

‘I thought you came from there?’

For someone stupid, Emily’s remarkably clever. I breeze out of the trailer faux casual, visibly trembling. This is all getting way out of hand.

I start off towards the water’s edge, taking deep, calming breaths. But the problem with film sets is that you’re never more than five metres from a crew member – privacy is simply not an option. In fact, here’s Tarquin right now, brandishing his script.

‘Boy, am I glad to see you. I swear you’re the only sane person on this job.’ Why does everyone keep saying that to me? Particularly considering I feel like I’m going literally insane. It’s only a matter of time before I come on-set with knitting needles poking out of my nostrils, pretending to be a woolly mammoth.

‘What’s up?’ I say, fixing a caring smile on my face. Why are they all so damn needy?

‘Suzanne’s saying we’ve got to shoot two pages of dining-room interiors this afternoon. I was meant to have the whole bloody day for this sequence. It’s the living, breathing heart of the love affair – it’s got to be perfect or you won’t believe any of it.’

I glance down at the scene, wondering if Tarquin’s hurtling towards his own mammoth moment. Surely he knows lines like

‘Without you my life is a dry, sandy desert, parched of love’ might be beyond saving? Still, my job is to soothe, not to criticize.

‘But you’re so well prepped. Emily’s on side for pushing on through and Charles is brilliant, so it should be absolutely fine.’ Can I please stop bringing Charles into every single conversation? And God strike me down for spinning Emily’s spiky attitude with such alacrity.

‘Yeah, I suppose. You will be there the whole time, won’t you? They both seem like your biggest fans. It’s just good to have you on hand.’

‘I’ll be welded to the beach, I promise. I need to talk to you anyway…’ I decided this morning that it’s time to share my titanic struggle with the budget. If tough choices need to be made about where the remainder is spent, Tarquin has to tell me where his priorities lie.

‘Yeah, sure… whatever,’ he says, visibly distracted.

‘I’m just having problems –’

‘Lulu, can we talk about it another time?’ he snaps, turning away. ‘I’ve got quite a bit on my plate right now.’

I back off, feeling an idiot for raising it on such a tough day. It’s just that I know that I’m hurtling towards bankruptcy, and it’s so hard to get time with Tarquin away from the hawk-like gaze of Suzanne. If she, queen of the bean counters, finds out the truth, Zelda will never forgive me.

Zelda, Zelda, Zelda. It’s been three weeks since I saw her, and I have to admit I’m almost avoiding her. I have good reason – the fact

that I'm terrified I'm not living up to her expectations, my reluctance to avoid her perceptive eye when it comes to Charles – but it runs way deeper than that. However stressful this production gets, all we're really engaged in doing is telling a story. How can that ever be as difficult as engaging with a reality as fraught with dark possibility as Zelda's? I'm feeling myself filling up when I'm tapped on the shoulder.

'Shit,' says Tarquin, holding out a cup of coffee. 'I didn't mean to upset you so much. Here, peace offering.'

If he knew the amount of times I'd been screamed at by queenie actors, or indeed Zelda, he'd know how egotistical his assumption is.

'Thanks, Tarquin. It's fine… honestly.'

'You're my mate, Lulu,' he says, with an attempt at a disarming smile. 'You do know that, don't you? That's why you're the one I let off steam around.'

What a privilege.

'Sure, yeah. It was just that I needed to –'

Tarquin cuts straight across me.

'Anyway, we're nearly set up, so I'll see you down there.'

And with that he tootles off, whistling, pausing only to pull up the hood on his huge, goose-down puffa, a garment designed to withstand sub-zero temperatures in deepest Antarctica.

'Cock,' says Charles, coming up behind me.

'Sorry?!'

'Oh, I know you like him, and blah blah blah. But the man is a complete and utter penis.'

Every time I see Charles I feel like I've come home. It's like every single, solitary cell in my body knows every cell of his.

'No, you've got a point,' I say. 'In fact, I'd go as far as to say you're right.'

'Excellent!' says Charles. 'I love to have my wisdom appreciated by a beautiful woman.'

The second assistant director is frantically beckoning him, so he sets off down the beach.

'I'll see you over there!' he shouts back at me, hair extensions blowing back comically in the wind.

Knowing it'll take a good half hour to get the actors in place, I go and kill some time at the catering truck. I swear I put on at least a stone on every job. Gary the chef foists a bacon sandwich on me and I scoff it greedily, throwing out the odd crumb for the hordes of seagulls circling his van. By the time I get down to the beach, Emily's already standing in the water, complaining bitterly about the cold. Tarquin's still in the cajoling stage, the deceptive precursor to out-and-out rage.

'Just lean forward, Ems, and ease yourself in. The quicker you do it, the quicker we'll wrap.'

'I can't, Tarquin!' she whines. 'You couldn't do your job if you were as cold as me.'

Charles hovers on the beach, face betraying nothing. We share a tiny smile, but I know I can't risk approaching him. With so much standing around, all the crew have got to do is gossip, and the last

thing I want to do is become hot topic numero uno. With a hysterical wail, Emily finally launches herself into the water.

'OK, we're going for a take,' shouts the first assistant director.

Emily is meant to spot Charles on the beach and cry out for his assistance.

'Sir Percival, Sir Percival!' she squeaks, so high-pitched that I'm surprised there's not feedback. Her arms fly up pathetically, making it blatantly obvious that her feet are safely rooted to the seabed.

'You know what, Emily, I just don't believe you,' says Tarquin. 'You keep telling me you're desperate to get out, so show me that desperation when you're calling for Charles.'

'I am desperate!' snarls Emily. 'Look at my teeth,' she continues, pointing at her gleaming, professionally whitened gnashers. 'They're chattering like fucking maracas!'

'We all have to suffer for our art, Emily,' shoots back Tarquin. 'Take it from me, I'm suffering.'

I think we can safely say that cast relations are not Tarquin's strong suit. Emily bursts into angry tears, storms from the water and slams the door of her trailer. With Suzanne speeding towards set, confidently assuming this shot's in the can, Tarquin's desperate. And guess who he thinks he can call on in his hour of need?

'She just swore at me when I tried to go and see her,' he pleads. 'If she rings her agent then Suzanne will find out and I'll be toast. I'm going to get my anger stuff under control, I promise. As a friend, please will you help me?'

Hmm, Tarquin getting fired. Much as I'm going off him, it's his inexperience that's saved me from getting busted. Anyone with more nouse would've known that I've already burnt my way through most of the cash. As I'm weighing up what's best to do, I see Charles give me a tiny, imperceptible pleading look. Stuck there in his breeches, desperate for it all to be over, I'm his only hope. How can I let him down?

'Emily?' I say, rapping on the metallic door. 'Can I talk to you?'

'Go aw-aaay,' she shouts nasally.

I pause, tempted to turn back and let Suzanne deal with the car crash that is this production, but then I remember Charles's look of intimacy and trust. It's us against the world and I for one am not giving in.

'I totally understand why you're upset. He behaved like a pig. But this is a war we can win.'

There's a long pause and then the door creaks open.

'A war?' she says, a nasty smirk crossing her chops. Emily is pure poison and the prospect of a fight is way too tempting to turn down.

'Yes, Emily, a war,' I say, stepping inside, wondering when it was I became such a master manipulator. Then I remember how we used to play on Dad's guilt about his absentee parenting skills to bankroll our teenage excess, and it all becomes clear.

'Tarquin doesn't think you're up to the challenge, but we all know you are.'

'Do you know that, Lulu, really?'

‘Your vulnerability is extraordinary,’ I tell her earnestly. ‘I wouldn’t be at all surprised if we’re at the BAFTAs next year, thanks to you.’

‘Seriously?’

Going on our current performances, I’m a way more worthy candidate. I know I’m a two-faced liar, but I’m prostituting my soul for the greater good. Or at least for love, however misplaced.

‘Oh yes,’ I continue. ‘But only if you can force yourself to take his shit for a few more weeks. He’s going nowhere fast, whereas you… well, in six months you’ll be sending him a postcard care of “Hollyoaks” from your hotel in Hollywood.’

Emily gives a honking giggle. ‘Aah, you’re well funny sometimes, Lulu. You’re right, I rule!’

‘Too right you do, girlfriend,’ I say, a phrase I never could have predicted would come out of my mouth.

Emily gives me a damp hug before letting me adjust her costume in preparation for receiving Tarquin’s grovelling apology.

‘You are my sunshine, my only sunshine,’ he sings as she approaches the water again. ‘Anything you want, Lulu, anything…’

Ten thousand pounds more budget and Charles’s marriage annulment spring to mind. Still, you can’t have everything. Thus far there’s no sign of either, but Charles does give me the most melting smile imaginable, causing my heart to not just turn over, but also do the splits and vault over a horse.

My pep talk has worked miracles. Emily knuckles down and does her bit, only resorting to the odd spot of pantomime shivering.

Before long we've got to Charles's turn in the water, which involves a long sprint up the beach before he frantically throws himself in. 'Wish me luck,' he whispers as the second assistant director takes him up the beach to the starting point. Tarquin, meanwhile, is virtually orgasming at the prospect of the running shot. He's channelling *Chariots of Fire* and imagining he's somehow going to snare an Oscar nomination for a low-budget TV potboiler. His arms are windmilling around as he instructs the camera team to do his bidding. 'You're in turmoil!' he's telling Charles. 'You've been stamping down on your passion for Bertha for months, but now it's cascading out of you!' Charles looks faintly bemused by the spitting, fulminating director and quietly goes to find his mark. Eleven takes later ('Run faster!', 'Run slower!', 'Groan in distress!') Tarquin is forced to call it quits. The light is starting to go and we haven't even begun the water section of the rescue. Charles retreats to his trailer while the camera team set up the shot. 'Nice work, mate,' shouts Tarquin, clapping him on the back, curiously oblivious to the hostility that's radiating off him.

As I'm busying myself in the wardrobe caravan, my phone beeps. 'Has my favourite crew member got time for a much-needed hot chocolate?' I run over my good intentions from last week, before tossing them aside. Surely I can make an exception for such a stressful day? I take a circuitous route round the back of the beach, paranoid about being spotted. Why am I feeling so guilty when so little has happened? I sense he feels the same, judging by the way he bundles me into his trailer and slams the door.

‘Here you are, darling,’ he says, thrusting a mug into my hand. ‘I only wish it was something stronger.’

‘Me too,’ I agree, a tad too fervently.

‘You did brilliantly earlier. It’s so obvious you should be directing this show, not that dwarfish dick-head.’

‘Oh, I know,’ I say. ‘If only they’d recognize my genius!’

‘It’s only a matter of time,’ he laughs.

We guzzle our hot chocolates, sitting a little too close, until I’m lost in a fantasy that we’re on a caravanning honeymoon (a fantasy I could never have predicted, but it’s good to riff on the reality that’s presented). We’re weaving through rural France in a charming 1940s model, taking frequent sex stops in beautiful valleys. My reverie’s broken by a harsh rap on the metal door. I flinch, illogically casting my eyes around for somewhere to hide. ‘Charles, on set in five,’ shouts the second AD.

‘Coming!’ he shouts back.

‘I’m so glad you’re here for this,’ he says conspiratorially. ‘I’m utterly dreading it.’

‘I’m totally here.’

‘Good,’ he says gently then springs to his feet. ‘Will I do?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say, leaning forward and readjusting his shirt a bit. What am I thinking? Touching him is asking for trouble. I know it’s a cliché, but it feels like a current of electricity is running between us. We break away and I make for the door.

‘I’ll follow you in a couple of minutes,’ he says, the subtext of *people might talk* ringing out loud and clear.

‘OK,’ I say, shaken and stirred.

Tarquin’s pretty much frothing at the mouth by now, doing a strange, rocking dance as he describes the handheld angles he’s going to use to cover some of the rescue. The laddish blokes who make up the crew humour him, but look distinctly bemused. Once Charles and Emily are in the water, Charles slips effortlessly into character, yanking her from the surf in an utterly convincing state of love-struck panic. Although my brain knows he’s acting, my innards experience a sharp pang of jealousy. How misplaced and absurd is that? The real issue is the fact that he goes home to a wife and children, not that he’s good at acting. Take after take ensues, with Emily’s whinge-o-meter gradually creeping up the scale. To be fair, she’s got a point, although not one word of complaint crosses Charles’s lips.

Finally we get to the last shot, a blatant rip-off of *From Here to Eternity*, where Percival carries a sodden, half-dead Bertha out of the water and back to the big house. Mutters of relief ring round the set as Tarquin’s hellishly slow seaside sojourn starts to look like it might be drawing to a close. I spot Charles give me a subtle smile from the water, more relieved than most that it’s nearly done.

‘Action!’ shouts Tarquin.

And within a matter of minutes my brief reign as on-set golden girl is over. As the dwindling winter sun starts to dry out the cheap Lycra mix that I used for Charles’s breeches, they don’t just cling to his form but turn virtually transparent. The entire crew stands

transfixed, staring at his (not inconsiderable) tackle, until Tarquin finally notices.

'Cut, cut, cut!' he shouts, beyond enraged. 'How the FUCK did this happen?'

Charles, now aware his crotch is the star of the show, is trying to cover himself. I rush over with a towel, apologies streaming forth.

'I'm so, so sorry. I had no idea that –'

'Correct me if I'm wrong,' says Tarquin, icily menacing, 'but doesn't your job description suggest that having an IDEA about the costumes is key?'

'I know, I know… I'm sorry, but the budget…'

I'm trying my best not to cry, unable to look at Charles who I'm right next to.

'I don't wanna hear it. You're a fucking amateur and I want you off my set. You've humiliated the most important person here.'

I seriously think about drowning myself, but I fear it would take too long.

'Just stop there!' shouts Charles unexpectedly. 'You do not talk to her like that. It was an honest mistake. What gives you the right to talk to people like they're dirt?'

'I was defending you from that fucking incompetent!' shouts Tarquin.

'The only person we need defending from is you,' counters Charles. 'Not Lulu.'

'Fine,' says Tarquin, all ice. 'You've made your feelings clear.' He turns as if to return to his trailer, staying long enough to mutter

‘You stupid little bitch’ under his breath. As he says it I feel my guts contract, acutely aware he’ll make my life a misery for whatever time I’ve got left on this job.

‘What did you say?’ snarls Charles, who’s still right next to us. Before Tarquin’s had time to reply, he’s launching himself at him. ‘Don’t you dare talk to her like that.’

I’d like to say that he fights a duel for my honour, but the first AD steps in before he can even land a punch. Charles shakes him off and storms off to his trailer, after which the day is mercifully declared a wrap. The shot will have to be picked up, at a cost of thousands, and I’ll be lucky to stay in my job.

I know I’ve got a lot of grovelling to do, but I need to pull myself together first. I run to my car, shaking off the kindly colleagues who try to talk to me, desperate to find the bottle of Rescue Remedy I keep in the glove compartment. I shake a few drops under my tongue, lean on the steering wheel and sob my heart out, praying for the moment to arrive where I’ll be calm enough to call Alice. How could I have done that to Charles? And what will Zelda think of me when she finds out what scant care I’ve taken of her legendary reputation? When there’s a tap on the window, I jump out of my skin. I wouldn’t put it past Tarquin to light a match and leave me to die, a human fireball. ‘She asked for it,’ he’d tell the police self-righteously. ‘She was flagrantly compromising my brilliance.’ I hesitantly look up, only to see Charles peering in at me. I wind down the window.

‘I will never, ever forgive myself for what I just did to you. If they don’t sack me, I promise I’ll resign, although…’ And with that I dissolve into a new storm of tears, thinking about how stuffed Zelda will be if I come off this job.

‘Hey, can I get a word in edgeways?’ says Charles kindly. ‘In fact, can I get in?’

I flick the lock and try to get myself under control. If he ever did harbour any impossible and pointless desires, they’ll be well and truly quashed by the sight of my snotty, red face. Madame Bovary must’ve been very good at keeping a stiff upper lip: full-scale waterworks are a cast-iron antidote to adultery. Or maybe not. Charles is stroking my hair now, making shushing noises. I still can’t bring myself to look up, partly because the sensation is so hypnotic.

‘Lulu, we all make mistakes. Me turning down *We Will Rock You* for example. I’d have no mortgage and a house in the Maldives if I’d had the foresight to realize it would run and run.’

I twist my head to the left and look at him.

‘Did you really turn it down? You don’t look much like Freddie Mercury.’

‘No, but I knew the thought of me in tight leather trousers would bring you back to the land of the living.’

He’s right. I laugh despite myself.

‘I am really sorry though, Charles. I know I’m sounding like a broken record, but I don’t know how to convey to you…’

And again the tears are coming. Today was truly terrible, but these sobs dig much deeper, right into the bottomless void that’s

been left by Zelda's absence. It's bad enough to think that she'll be furious, but even worse to think she might not be that bothered. That there might be bigger shadows looming that will make Charles's transparent trousers pale into insignificance.

I find myself telling him all this between sobs, letting him hold my hand, and ultimately leaning into his chest in a soggy, spent heap. He's stroking my hair, I'm looking up… and then we're kissing. I'll never know who started it, but once it's begun there's no stopping it. He's leaning over, trying to get more of a grip on me, I'm pulling at his hair, kissing him ferociously – and then I remember what this means and force myself to pull away.

'Christ, Lulu, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have… Oh bugger, why do you have to be so damn lovely?'

He's looking at me with such soulful intensity, with a depth of feeling that I return in spades. But I know that the second I articulate it, life as I know it will be over.

'I think you probably should go,' I hear myself saying, when what I really want to say is *I think you should stay for ever and ever*. Oh God: what if the love of my life just happens to be the love of someone else's life too?

'You're right, I should,' he agrees, sending a sensation of cold blackness right through me. Why doesn't he come up with some magical solution that will make this the joyous thing that it should be, rather than the sordid little workplace fumble that it looks like?

'I'll see you tomorrow,' I say, wondering whether we kiss goodbye on the cheek like nothing's happened. But Charles leans in and

kisses me very lightly on the lips.

‘Goodbye, Lulu,’ he says, holding my gaze before he steps out into the night.

‘Goodbye’ could mean so many things – but right now none of them sound good.

Chapter Nine

If Alice had been in on my return, I know I'd have broken and told her everything. Instead she's out, so I retreat to bed with our 'Sex and the City' box set and comfort myself with the fact that all four girls ultimately found happiness. The comfort's fairly fleeting as the harsh truth that they're fictional characters hits home. Uptown in the real world I'm trying to work out if I'm duty bound to tell Zelda, or if I can find a solution myself and save her the stress.

I spend the night tossing and turning, going round the different mental rat-runs my current situation affords me. Come five thirty a.m. I look like a banshee, complete with dark-ringed eyes and fright-wig hair. Luckily the lack of sleep gives me a full forty-five minutes to plaster myself in make-up and construct a vaguely attractive outfit. There are no night-time texts from Charles, but one from Suzanne asking me to find her first thing in the production office. Welcome to Tuesday…

I catch her off guard, having a fag out of the window and sucking up the first of the hundreds of cups of black coffee she needs to get her through each day. The last thirty years have passed in a life-

obliterating blur of production: I wouldn't be surprised if her poor, beleaguered liver thinks we're still living under Jim Callaghan.

'There you are!' she rasps, covertly stubbing her cigarette out on the window sill. 'Talk me through the disaster that was yesterday, Lulu. I'm all ears.'

She fixes me with a steely gaze, leaving me feeling like I'm trapped with a chain-smoking headmistress. Suzanne's particularly malicious style of man management is to stay silent, ensuring you create enough verbal rope to hang yourself with. I'm swinging from the scaffold in no time, making a hopelessly babbling attempt to blame the puny budget without sounding like a responsibility-shirking whinger.

'Can I be frank?' she asks eventually.

What would happen if I just said no?

'Yes, of course.'

'You're a hard worker, Lulu, always have been, but I'm not sure you're one of life's leaders. I wasn't convinced you had the experience for this, but Zelda promised me she'd be there to catch you. Now I'm feeling like you've both let me down.'

This is exactly what I was dreading. It looks like I'm going under and I'm taking Zelda with me. But as I think it, I'm filled with a tidal wave of resolve. I've put too much into the job to let this happen. If that self-serving little twat Tarquin can survive, then so can I.

'The choice of fabric was entirely my mistake. Zelda's been working so hard on the outfits for Lady Agatha that she has given me way more free rein than normal.' I've bust a gut on those

dresses, poring over books in the British Library and trawling the V&A for inspiration.

'I can't fault her on those costumes, they've got that classic Zelda magic. That's why I hired her for this job, because she delivers that kind of look whatever the money's like.'

It's so unfair. I've poured my heart and soul into this and I can't even take a scrap of the credit. I grit my teeth and continue to shower praise on Zelda, promising Suzanne that I will defer to her wise counsel throughout the rest of the job.

'You've got an unexpected fan,' says Suzanne, cutting straight across me. 'Charles called me last night, begging me to be lenient.'

'Oh?' I squeak. 'What did he say?'

'That you'd been incredibly professional throughout, and that he wasn't going to hold a grudge.'

'Bless Charles!' I say before I can help myself.

'Don't get too cocky, Lulu. The man clearly loathes Tarquin, which just makes you the lesser of the two evils. I've got a whole production to run here. It's not up to him who I hire and fire.'

'I promise you that from here on in I'll be so much more careful –'

She waves her hand dismissively. 'Stop apologizing, Lulu, it's getting boring.'

There's an interminable pause, during which she stares out of the window, taking the odd moody puff on her fag. Is she really going to give me the boot?

'I'm not impressed, not impressed at all. If it wasn't for the fact I've been promised normal service will resume in two weeks, you'd

be out on your arse.'

'Normal service?'

'Yes, when Zelda's back! Do you two not even communicate with each other?'

'Of course we –'

'We'll organize a second unit pick-up for the shot and hide the cost in the contingency. Hopefully we can just about get away with it. Now go out there and get on with it.'

She shoos me out of her office, slamming the door behind me. A fortnight? The woman's deluded, still running on the timetable that Zelda made up when she forced me into the hot seat. There's no way I can keep all this under wraps.

'Zelda, I need you,' I say, getting her answering machine yet again. 'I need to know how you are. Nothing's the same without you…'

'All right, all right,' she says, snatching up the receiver. 'No wonder you work in drama!'

An hour later I'm on the doorstep, bunch of flowers in one hand, notebook in the other. I'm a hornet's nest of ambivalence, longing to see her and dreading the worst. Oh well, at least it gives me an excuse to avoid having to go to set, a place more fraught with danger than the Gaza Strip.

The door creaks open to reveal a sight I never expected to witness: Zelda in jeans. Elaborate frocks with billowing scarves are her stock-in-trade. Her deep rose lipstick is also absent and even her red fingernails seem to have gone by the wayside.

‘Don’t look at me like that, Lulu. It’s dress-down Tuesday, or whatever it is they call it.’

‘You look nice… natural. You just don’t look like, well, look like you,’ I say.

She steps aside to let me in. ‘Well, I don’t need the armour, do I?’

Does she have a point? Is how we look only about who witnesses us, or is it part of who we are, regardless? If a mascara wand falls in the forest and there’s no one to hear it, does it make a sound?

Once we’re in the kitchen, I give her the huge bouquet I bought en route. ‘Thank you,’ she says, before muttering waspishly that she’s not an invalid. Then we’re plunged into an awkward pause, something I can barely remember happening in the decade we’ve worked together. Unable to bear it any longer, I tear off into an account of my crimes like a yappy little terrier chasing a stick.

‘… It’s just the money, Zelda, it’s unworkable,’ I say, monologue complete. Zelda’s remained silent throughout, inscrutably absorbing the information with none of her trademark bossy remonstration. I almost long for an explosion, for her to chastise me horribly and then offer me absolution. If we can go down that well-worn path then, then… then life is still the same.

‘You are coming back soon, aren’t you?’ I add, sounding like a whiny toddler. ‘You promised me you were coming back.’

She unexpectedly steps towards me, putting an arm around my shoulders.

‘Not immediately, darling, no.’

‘When then?’ I ask her, voice rising, wishing I could be more of a grown-up than this.

‘Soon I hope. When all this is over and done with.’

‘All what? Just be straight with me, Zelda, please.’

And finally we get to the bottom of what’s wrong. It’s early stage kidney cancer: an elusive shadow on a CT scan heralding a barrage of radiotherapy and drugs. I weep silently, squeezing her hand as she breezes on.

‘Honestly, darling, you’d think it’d be the lungs that’d be giving way, all the Gauloises I’ve chugged through over the years. I’ve never given a moment’s thought to my kidneys. They sound like some pointless little organ one might use in a gruesome recipe.’

She takes in my snotty red face and gives me a warm smile.

‘Lulu, don’t take on so. All is not lost. There’s a treatment plan in place: I can assure you I’ve got no intention of shuffling off my mortal coil any time soon.’

‘What can I do, Zelda?’ I wail. ‘Just tell me what I can do.’

‘You can do exactly what you’re doing now, which is running that show the best way you can. Well, not exactly what you’re doing now – you could afford to be just a little bit less hopeless.’

‘I know I need to get my act together. But what if you were wrong? What if I’m just not ready? If you want to replace me, I won’t complain.’

‘Oh no, missy, you’re not getting out of it that easily. I stand by everything I said. It’s your time now. You need to grip up and plough on.’ She continues, more softly, ‘I’m sorry if I’ve gone to

ground. It's all proved rather a lot to absorb.' She looks away then grabs my notebook. 'There's work to do here!'

We go through the upcoming costumes one by one, and before long Zelda's natural enthusiasm is flooding back. She grabs her coloured pens, sketching vigorously as she puffs on a fag.

'Should you…' I start tentatively.

'Should I, would I, could I? Please allow me some small pleasure, Lulu. Why are your generation so bloody abstemious?'

I know better than to take her on, concentrating instead on absorbing as much of her brilliance as I can. Despite being allergic to a low budget, she manages to come up with various ingenious solutions, as well as suggesting some fantastic innovations for the costumes I've already designed. Before I know it, it's 7 o'clock and Zelda's packing me off before Michael gets home.

'All hell will break loose if he finds I've been working.'

'Is he around at the moment? Is he looking after you?'

'He's being a total trooper,' confirms Zelda. 'Makes you think… I hope you're getting out there, Lulu. Time's ticking on.'

If anyone else referred so blatantly to my biological clock, I'd be furious, but I know Zelda means it kindly.

'Have you met anyone?' she continues, casting a beady glance.

'Um, maybe,' I say, lost for words. 'It's complicated.'

'Sexy complicated or fucking disastrous?'

Luckily I'm saved by the sound of Michael's key in the lock. I kiss hello and goodbye, before beating a hasty retreat to the car. It could be worse, I think to myself, much worse. Zelda's still working, albeit

less noisily, and the doctors seem confident she'll make a full recovery. I set off for home reasonably cheered, keen to see Alice before she charges out on her date with Richard. If I can drip feed the reality of him perhaps she won't get swept away on a tidal wave of romantic delusion. When Alice falls, she falls as hard as Humpty Dumpty, and I'm not sure I'll be able to put her back together again.

My phone beeps at the lights and I take a sneaky look at it, my brush with the law having failed to cure my bad driving habits. Oh God, I so shouldn't have gone there. It's Charles:

> Looked everywhere for you, but not a trace.
> Any chance you could make time for a glass of wine with a hapless turn?

What to do? Of course every fibre of my being longs to see him, but I can't for the life of me see what it would achieve. He's someone else's husband; if he wants an affair, he's by definition a bad egg, but if he's letting me down gently then my logic-defying heart will plunge into despair. Both ends of the lollipop are fuzzy and yet I can't resist reaching out for it.

He suggests a pub somewhere off the Portobello Road, which at first glance looks kind of seedy. However, as it's Notting Hill the wine list is knee deep in Châteauneuf du Pape. I nurse a small, affordable glass of house white while I wait for him, conflicting feelings turning me inside out. Where can this possibly be going – am I mad to be giving it this much emotional energy? For all I know this might be a tired old routine he trots out on every job: a 'what

goes on tour, stays on tour' perk to break up the inevitable monotony of family life.

He arrives fifteen minutes late, tousled and stressed.

'Christ, sorry. How utterly ungentlemanly of me. Have you been plagued by horny old lechers?'

'No, no, I haven't,' I say, unable to indulge the banter. I need to know what it is he wants to say.

'It's lovely to see you,' he says.

'Thanks.' I'm not going to give too much away. I don't want to be the latest in a long line of foolish females, falling for the oldest line in the book.

He gives one of those melting smiles. 'Drink? Lord knows I need one.'

'Just a small one, I'm driving.' He gives me a persuasive look and my emotional barricade starts to collapse. 'I mean it, a tiny one,' I say, grinning dopily like a faithful Labrador whose owner's just returned from a round-the-world trip. He goes to the bar and I look at his retreating back, wondering what the truth of him is. I feel stupidly close to him and yet I hardly know him. I couldn't even tell you what drink he's going to come back with – if it's a flaming sambuca it might put an entirely different complexion on events. No – he returns with a glass of wine and a perfectly sensible double whisky, chinking glasses and then less sensibly downing his drink in one.

'I'm going to get another one,' he says. 'Apologies, I promise I don't behave like George Best every Tuesday evening.'

When he comes back I notice that his hand is shaking. Could he be every bit as nervous as me? My stupid little heart starts tentatively hoping that he's effected a miracle. He'd been on the verge of divorce anyway and my arrival is just a bizarre coincidence. He's left already and none of it's my fault. He's here to tell me that his wife's completely OK, the children are untraumatized and he's late because he stopped to collect the keys for our rose-bowered cottage.

'Lulu?'

'Sorry, did you say something?'

'I was asking how you are? If you're feeling better today?'

'A little bit, yes. I'm still so mortified…'

He moves his hand to cover mine. 'Enough of that, really. It's forgotten.'

There's a pause, during which I concentrate on the feeling of skin on skin. He must think I'm some kind of mute freak, but I simply don't know what to say. Every conversational avenue feels so hazardous that all I can do is wait for him to make the leap. He squeezes my hand then intertwines his fingers with mine.

'I know I've only just arrived, but I'm afraid it will have to be a flying visit. I told Bea I was going to my fencing lesson.'

'Oh, OK.' She's got a name now. She's real and, thanks to me, her husband is bare-facedly lying to her. How can this be good?

'Lulu, I don't know what to say to you. All I want to do right now is leave this pub, take you home and spend the night with you. And the next day with you and the one after that. And the fact that I

can't is driving me crazy. It's ridiculous – I hardly know you and I'm thinking about you for pretty much every waking moment.'

'Me too,' I say, as I try to take on board what he's saying. Is he sincere? Can he feel this much on so little? It's like he reads my mind.

'I know you won't believe me, but I've never done this before. You've just come along and moved all the pieces around in my head.'

'Charles…'

He's agitated now, his handsome face contorted with emotion.

'I married the wrong person and I've known that for a long time. But to extricate myself is going to damage too many people. I wish this could be the start of something, because if it was, my hunch is it would be pretty special. But how can it be?'

I will myself not to cry, but it's beyond me. I've always cried easily, a weakness that Alice used to ruthlessly exploit in her meaner moments. The day she gave my Ballerina Sindy a short back and sides was like Niagara.

'I don't want to hurt you and I don't want to hurt your family,' I say, tears starting to fall. 'How I feel about you is totally illogical and I wish more than anything that I didn't.'

'You're utterly captivating… you know that, don't you?'

If I'm honest, I don't. I've never felt like I've particularly captivated any of the men I've been with, but nor am I sure they've captivated me. Why is it now, with the one man I can't have, I finally feel the surge of emotion that's always eluded me?

‘Oh Christ, this is awful,’ says Charles, looking stricken.

‘I know,’ I say, squeezing his hand.

‘It’s like being infected by some dreadful virus with no known antidote.’

‘What, like Ebola?’ I say, smiling despite myself.

‘No, more like typhoid,’ he says, smiling back. ‘Or some dreadful Victorian thing that gives one weeping sores and mania.’

‘Lucky old us!’ I say, determined to get a grip. The situation is hopeless: I’ve got to face it down. ‘Charles, I should go.’

‘I know, I know we’ve got to go,’ he says, enfolding me in a hug. I settle back into his chest, convinced there’s a space that’s been specifically designed for my raw, wet face. ‘Why did I have to meet you now?’ he mutters into my hair.

Why indeed? Why does life have to be so unfair? Does fate give with one hand and take with the other? Was Mum’s premature death meant to be somehow compensated for by the fact that I’d been gifted a twin? I pull away, scared that if he pulls away first I’ll feel like my heart’s been yanked out by its bloody roots.

‘This is me, leaving,’ I say.

‘I’ll walk you to your car.’

‘No, don’t. I can’t…’

I can’t bear it if you don’t kiss me and I can’t bear it if you do. I stumble out, not able to say goodbye or even look back. I drive a little way, then pull up until my sobs have subsided. At least it’s over now. We both know where we stand. I’ll try my best to avoid him at work and concentrate on letting the jagged pain recede. I’ve

done grief, I know how it works, and – although it's a cliché – time really is the greatest healer.

As I drive through West London I try to force myself to look on the bright side. I couldn't live with the guilt of being a mistress, or potentially becoming the agent of a family's destruction. At least this way it's over before it began. When I pull up, I'm surprised to see that the living-room light is on. Alice is sat on the sofa, dolled up to the nines and mechanically eating Pringles.

'What's the deal with your date?' I ask her.

'Are you OK?' she asks immediately.

I bat it away. 'I'll tell you in a minute. What happened to the date?'

'It's just a late date. It's like I'm Carrie Bradshaw, minxing it around Manhattan.' Alice looks slightly unconvinced by her own spin on the situation. 'He's got to shut up the off-licence before we can go out, so I'm meeting him at ten thirty.'

'Is he not picking you up?'

'Don't start, Lulu. He's right on the high street so it'll be much quicker.'

'OK, OK. You look lovely by the way.'

'Do I?' she asks uncertainly.

'Yes!' I tell her. 'How could you not when you're my double?'

'Indeed!' she says, looking reassured. 'Now tell me everything.'

Everything's a bridge too far. Instead I rattle through my monumental screw-up and Charles's defence of my honour, judiciously leaving out all references to the postscript.

‘No wonder you look stressed,’ says Alice, and I think how she doesn’t know the half of it. ‘He sounds like a real sweetheart, he must really like you.’

‘Yes, yes. I think he does,’ I say stoically, determined to keep a lid on it.

‘Your job’s a living, breathing nightmare,’ she continues. ‘I hope Ali’s gonna provide some light relief.’

Ali. Oh God: the idea of going on a date with someone else is truly horrific. But I can’t see any way of cancelling it without rousing Alice and Gareth’s suspicions. Besides, the act of going will send a big fat message to my psyche that I’m no longer pining for the impossible.

‘Mm, let’s hope so,’ I say non-committally, rootling in my bag to find Alice some lipstick. Soon she’s out of the door, leaving me to give myself a stern, Zelda-like pep talk. It’s O-V-E-R over, like a country and western song sung by a short blonde woman with too much make-up. Time to put the madness of it all behind me and sign up for a Charles-free future. A few weeks ago I didn’t even know him: how hard can it be?

Chapter Ten

I try my best, I really do. I hang out in the production office, quiet as a mouse, avoiding the set. I sketch and sew and scheme, trying my very hardest to bat away any thoughts of Charles. Why one kiss should have an aftershock as intense and extended as this is beyond me, and yet it feels as though I've ended a full-blown relationship.

Alice, meanwhile, is bouncing around like the Duracel bunny. All her good intentions about playing hard to get have gone south and she's instead regaling me with gruesome tales of her hot loving with the rage-filled Richard. She's even threatening to invite him to the dinner we're hosting for Dad and Julia later in the week. I'm feeling the nervy agitation I often experience when I know Dad's coming to town, while Alice is doggedly focused on making the evening as perfect as possible. Neither of us are the greatest of cooks, so she's scouring the Internet for a recipe that's both impressive and idiot proof. The fact that Julia's a nutritionist makes it even more of a challenge. She'll think nothing of offering us handy hints about our bowel movements if the meal's low on roughage.

Luckily there are a few days to go before that particular ordeal. Tonight's challenge is my date with Ali. I want to want to go, but it feels like I'm going through the motions. I keep reminding myself

how twinkly he is: if it wasn't for the scourge of Charles, I'm sure I'd be beyond excited. He's picking me up at eight, and I'm half-heartedly slapping on eyeliner while Alice piles my bed with potential outfits.

'Seriously, Lulu, do you think I should hide?' she says, picking out a green velour jumpsuit that I felt inexplicably brave enough to wear five years ago. 'Or are you going to just admit you've got a twin and hope he finds the whole thing hilarious?'

'Dunno, it's a high-risk strategy. Remember Dave?'

Dave was the morbidly obese porter in Alice's accommodation block at university. Alice's boundless interest in other people's problems meant that he felt they had a special connection, giving him the courage to ask her out on a date. Moved by the various trials and tribulations he'd endured, she decided it was kinder to accept and then let him down gently. Big mistake. Before long her room began to fill with a strange, pervasive odour, seriously blighting her chances with any other man she chose to bring back. Eventually she discovered a kipper, cunningly stuffed under the carpet, a revenge crime one would otherwise dismiss as an urban myth. Hell hath no fury like a fat man scorned.

'I mean, a policeman could do way worse than that,' I say.

'If he carts you off to Guantanamo Bay, I promise I'll come and visit,' laughs Alice.

'Will you though? Or will you just stay in bed with Richard, feeding each other Maltesers between shags?'

'I might you know. He is s-o-o-o-o good at sex.'

‘Really? You hadn’t mentioned,’ I say, rolling my eyes.

Before long Ali’s ringing the doorbell. I’ve gone for skinny jeans and a shirt, hoping it’s vaguely sexy but not too try-hard. Alice hides out upstairs; I’ve decided I’ll tell him I’ve got a sister but nothing more. If this is a one-date pony, there’s no point feeding it oats.

‘Madam, your carriage awaits,’ he says as I open the door. Oh my God, he’s holding a motorbike helmet. This is the first time I’ve seen him in his civvies too, although I’m not sure his outfit counts as civvies. I can’t help casting a professional eye, breaking it down. My job’s all about conveying character via clothes, so I’m a super sleuth when it comes to sartorial clues. He’s wearing a shirt and tie combo with pale, belted chinos. It’s all very straight, very proper, and tells me loud and clear that he’s taking this date seriously. Oh dear, maybe jeans were a bad call. Or maybe I’ve clad myself in the truth, unwittingly externalizing my locked-up heart.

‘I’m really, really bad at balancing,’ I say nervously.

‘If you just grip me tightly, you’ll be fine,’ he says.

I can see Alice peeking out from behind the banisters, giving me a thumbs up. God knows it’s entirely justified – Ali is definitely cute. Open-faced, clean-cut: the kind of effortless good looks that the boys in those *Jackie* photo stories possessed in spades. If I’d known when I was thirteen that someone who looked like him would ever have asked me out I’d have died of joy, but life’s moved on a bit since.

Soon I’m straddling his roaring machine, setting off for who knows where. Our destination turns out to be an Italian restaurant near the river (but on the right side, thank God). Although it’s

slightly starched and formal, there's something appealing about the fact that he hasn't gone for the predictable gastro pub option. We won't be troughing hunks of dry meat surrounded by drunkards; instead I'll be waited on and called 'Signorina'. Not to mention being called Alice: am I really going to be able to keep this up?

'So this is random,' I say, immediately realizing how ungrateful I must sound.

'Jesus, have I left you feeling stalked?' he asks. 'I wouldn't have arrested you if you'd turned me down. Might've fixed a few speeding fines, but nothing too serious.'

He's fun. At least he's fun.

'I don't, I promise. It's flattering.'

'I'll issue me with a restraining order if you like.'

'That won't be necessary,' I laugh, picking up my menu.

'Sorry, Alice, let me get you a drink. What would you like?'

Alice, Alice. When we were little I used to think I'd drawn the short straw name-wise. When Mum read *Alice in Wonderland* I was utterly beguiled by the idea of a girl finding a magical dimension hidden somewhere beneath this one. There aren't many Lulus in the literary canon; it's such a silly, diminutive sort of a name. But Alice christened me Lulu when she was too small to say Louise, and the rest is history.

'Um, something white? Dryish?'

I look around the room, taking it in. This is not the type of restaurant liable to serve the kind of paint stripper that Rufus foists on us. The waiters are smart, the cutlery's heavy: it's a proper old-

fashioned Italian. It's definitely not one of those gruesome destination restaurants, which endlessly pipe 'emulsion' over tiny squares of endangered fish and then fleece you mercilessly. I bet that's the kind of place Tarquin would take someone on a date. And then insist they paid half.

Ali orders a couple of glasses and apologizes for not getting a bottle. 'I wanted to collect you, but it meant I had to bring the bike.'

'Don't apologize, it's lovely to be collected,' I tell him. Which God knows it is; if only I could throw off this pervasive sense of flatness.

'Where I'm from, the girls expected nothing less. You'd get a slap if you told them to get the bus.'

And he fills me in on where he grew up, a remote community in the West of Scotland. He moved down to London a couple of years ago to work for the Met.

'So what on earth lured you away?' I ask. 'Being a copper in London must be so scary. I'd just hide out in my panda car, willing the robbers to change their minds and go home.'

He laughs. 'Are you saying I'm a bumpkin, Alice?'

'No, I'm just wondering what would make you want to engage with it all. All that evil, I suppose. You must come up against some pretty nasty characters.'

'What, like gorgeous girls who don't know how to get their foot off the accelerator?'

Ooh, good riposte. I so wish it was hitting the sides. We break off to order and I realize that I've managed to chuck back my glass of wine in a heartbeat. The waiter asks me if I want another.

‘I’m not sure. If you’re driving, I don’t want to turn into some drunken old fishwife.’

‘Go on – I promise I’ll go slowly round the bends.’

I smile a yes at the waiter, who also pauses to take our food order.

‘So, is this a regular haunt?’ I ask Ali.

‘Is that a posh girl way of saying “Do you come here often”?’

Does he think I’m posh? I don’t feel posh. I’m way less posh than Charles.

‘N-o-o-o. I’m just curious.’

‘Can I be straight with you?’

I smile an assent.

‘I hardly ever manage to get out. My job takes up all my time, which is maybe why I’m reduced to picking up reckless drivers.’

‘Thanks!’ I tell him.

‘I’m teasing you, Alice,’ he says, suddenly sounding very Scottish. ‘No, it really does swallow up my life. I had to hunt for somewhere date-worthy on the Internet. I only know my way round London from the inside of a patrol car.’

I wonder what it would be like to get to know London from scratch, to feel your way round its sharp edges. This city is like a part of my DNA; I don’t remember a time when it felt unfamiliar to me. Much as I love it, if it wasn’t my place I’m not sure I’d want to try and penetrate its hard carapace.

‘So you never told me why,’ I say. ‘Why did you wanna come down here and go through getting to know somewhere so monolithic and scary?’

‘That’s a toughie.’

‘I’m interested,’ I press him.

‘You’re gonna think I’m some kind of boy scout if I tell you, but basically it’s because this is where the help’s needed. All this knife crime and gun crime and… I was chasing after junkies and car thieves back home, knowing they’d most likely go straight back out and do it again. Here I feel like maybe I can make a difference. I’m probably kidding myself, but I’d rather believe it. And obviously career-wise it’s much better than being Greyfriars Bobby up in the Highlands,’ he adds.

Oh, to have his certainty about life, that clarity about which is the right fork in the road. I’m such a blunderer.

‘Jesus,’ he continues, ‘what kind of selfish numpty am I? I haven’t even asked what you do.’

And I lamely blather on about my job, convinced he’ll think it’s the world’s most frivolous waste of time. Luckily my monologue’s cut short by the arrival of our starters.

‘Sounds exciting,’ he says politely. ‘Must be cool having your name in lights.’

‘Not so much in lights, normally in tiny writing scrunched up on the right-hand side of the screen.’

‘What kind of shows have you worked on?’

I’m on safe ground, aren’t I? He spends his life veering round London in a patrol car, not tucked up with a cup of cocoa watching TV drama. Besides, lovely though he is, I’m not feeling it. I suspect

he needs the kind of homely hausfrau-in-waiting that I'm never going to be.

'Can't you remember?' he laughs, registering the long pause.

'Um, yes. I did that drama "Showstopper" last year, and I did "Tell Me Lies".' Wish I hadn't mentioned that particularly trashy thriller: its name is so pertinent that I'm blushing scarlet. 'You won't have seen any of them, I'm sure,' I add hurriedly.

'You've got me sussed, haven't you? "Top Gear" is about my limit.'

'I bet that's not true. What's your favourite film?'

'Not sure I've got one,' says Ali. 'What's yours?'

'Surely everyone's got one? Even if it's *Watership Down* and they haven't seen it since they were five?'

'Oh no, it's definitely not that. Can't be dealing with cute, furry creatures dying on me.'

'But you can cope with fully grown men dying on you? Do you see many dead bodies?'

'Stop changing the subject,' he says. 'I asked you what yours was.'

'That's easy: *Annie Hall*.'

'That's Woody Allen, right? Self-obsessed New Yorkers whinging on about their therapy?'

'That's a very crude analysis.'

He makes a little 'get you' face.

'No, it is. It's much more sophisticated than that. It's a relationship told out of sequence. You know right from the outset

that it doesn't work out, so you're reading all the clues as to why they fuck it up even in the scenes where they're happy.'

'Sounds very uplifting.'

'It is though. You sort of know they could never have made it work with the kind of people they both are. You don't have to have any false hope about them seizing romantic happiness from the jaws of defeat. You can just watch a whole relationship play out truthfully: beginning, middle, end.'

'And why exactly do you find that satisfying, rather than hopelessly depressing?' asks Ali, a wry smile playing around his lips.

'Wouldn't it be easier to know?' I demand. 'To know what it is that's going to make it impossible rather than kidding yourself you can overcome things which are insurmountable?' I'm a case in point. If I'd been able to see that Steve and I were a match made in Slough, not heaven, I'd have saved myself two precious years.

'But how *can* you know?' counters Ali. 'Some of the kids I pull in, they think they know. They believe achieving things in life is impossible for them, that it's just for rich kids. It's about getting them to believe otherwise. Maybe your whining New Yorkers would've had a house full of kids and a happy old age if they'd looked at it differently.'

I wish I could be as gloriously simplistic as him. It's like he's fallen down the Magic Faraway Tree and landed in London.

'Or maybe they were realistic,' I snap. 'They accepted that their differences were too great and made an adult decision.'

‘But you can’t know at the beginning,’ he counters. ‘Last girl I dated was perfect for me at first, but stuff happens. Stuff that might not be there first off, even if you were looking for it. She went from my dream girl to my worst nightmare before I could catch my breath.’ He pauses for a moment, suddenly still. ‘Whereas someone else,’ he continues, smiling, ‘might seem like a bit of a nightmare, but turn out to be well worth the hassle.’

‘And who might that be?’

‘Dunno, just some hypothetical person I may’ve met.’

‘Is that right?’ I say, landing us in a flirty stand-off. Not sure how I feel about that, I rattle on: ‘So what was wrong with this ex of yours? Did she turn out to be a bank robber?’

‘Shagging my best friend after we’d got engaged seemed pretty criminal to me,’ he says. ‘If I’m honest, it wasn’t just the skanky smack heads that drove me down South.’

‘Poor you, that’s horrible. You must have been devastated.’

He shrugs, face shutting down. ‘I survived,’ he says, voice flat. ‘Better to know what a liar she was before we had a couple of screaming babies and an Alsatian to fight over.’

I want to ask him more, or even reach a hand over the table, but it’s as though the drawbridge has gone up. I try to make eye contact, but his jaw’s set, eyes cold. Why did he bring it up when he clearly can’t bear to talk about it?

‘Do you actually like Alsatians?’ I ask, clutching at conversational straws. ‘I could never imagine having one of those. Sorry, I do realize the dog wasn’t the point of your story.’

‘It’s fine,’ he says, warming up a bit. ‘Yeah, I’ve got quite keen on them since I’ve been in the Force. You end up being pretty grateful to them when you’re on a drugs raid. What’d you go for? Bet you’d have some namby-pamby dog with a velvet collar you’d made yourself.’

I’m about to vigorously dispute his assessment, before realizing that what I’d really like is a black pug. Maybe Alice and I could have twin pugs and dress them in tartan overcoats in winter. Dear me, I clearly need to move out of Hysteria Lane sharpish.

‘A pug?’ he says. ‘Yeah, I can see that.’

‘Can you?’

‘Definitely.’

Deciding the dog chat’s gone far enough, I launch in with more questions about his job. As he talks, I find myself increasingly fascinated by his decision to tunnel into the underbelly of urban life. I know for a fact I wouldn’t be able to get out of bed in the morning if I knew what really lurked beneath the surface. He talks a little more before holding his hand up.

‘Enough grimness, Alice. We need dessert and you need to give me the inside scoop on you. I’m in the dark here. Is that posh wee house all yours or is that smooth young man your flatmate?’

‘Gareth? Christ, no.’ I imagine for one awful moment what life would be like if Gareth and I lived together. Meticulously tidy and endlessly nosey, he would be the flatmate from hell. But then, living with anyone but Alice is almost unimaginable. Why am I wasting valuable seconds on this pointless mental cul-de-sac? I need a

decent answer pronto. Isn't the most convincing lie the one that's closest to the truth?

'Um, I live with my sister. She was upstairs at the party, so you wouldn't have seen her.'

I feel myself starting to blush and look down at the tablecloth. Christ, he must winkle confessions out of sculdugerous criminals on a daily basis: there's no way I'm going to get away with this. I wish I'd just come clean at the outset. I'm going to seem like a total freak if he calls my bluff.

'Is she older or younger?'

'Older,' I say, which is true of course. By a whole eight minutes.

'How much older?'

'Eight years.' Bollocks, I should've said two or something. Now I sound weird. Which I'm not, of course. It's perfectly normal to go out on a date and lie compulsively to a virtual stranger.

'That's quite a gap. You can't have been close growing up. My brother's three years older than me and he thought I was nothing but a whining brat till I was about twenty-five.'

'Er, yeah, no, we were actually. She used to take me shopping and… ice skating and rollerblading.' What am I talking about? Alice and I hate sport more than poison. If I manage a yoga class once a month I act like I'm God's gift to exercise.

'Can't imagine a sibling like that. Me and Alan still don't have much to say to each other. He just rings me up and gives me advice about cars and power tools.'

‘It’s probably his weird way of telling you he loves you.’ It’s not my business, I know, but I can feel it’s the truth from the way he says it. I tell Alice I love her once a day at least, it’s a bedtime minimum – for all their unfair fertility advantages, I’d hate to be a man.

‘Do you think?’ says Ali, sounding genuinely surprised.

‘Of course it is! When’d you last tell him you loved him? You do love him, don’t you?’

‘He’s my brother,’ he says in a tone that indicates it’s obvious. ‘Dunno, probably never.’

‘Would you like to?’

He pauses.

‘Maybe. Can’t imagine it though.’

I leave him pondering for a few seconds.

‘Alan, by the way, is not a great name. No wonder he was mean to you growing up. He so drew the short straw at the christening.’

‘Very popular name in Scotland, I’ll have you know. What beautiful, perfect name is your sister blessed with then?’

Oh no. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the almost truth.

‘Lulu. Her name’s Lulu. Well, Louise really.’

‘Lulu? Have to say, that’s a cute name.’

‘What do you mean?’ I ask him, curiosity getting the better of me.

‘Dunno, just sounds like she’d be pretty. Which I’m sure she is, if you’re anything to go by.’ He laughs. ‘Sorry, shouldn’t have said

that. Now I sound like I'm hitting on your sister and perving on you, all in one go.'

'Perverting the course of justice!' I add, all high-pitched and screechy. Think first, speak later: I can see it right now on the charge sheet. Even though I'm having an unexpectedly good time, I've got to make a speedy exit before I make this any worse. 'Um, I've got a really early start and my thighs are ballooning with all the bacon sandwiches. I should probably skip dessert and head home.'

Ali looks unbearably crestfallen. 'Oh, are you sure you won't have a coffee at least?'

'I guess I could go a peppermint tea if you twist my arm,' I tell him.

'Do you mind if I have something? I'm a sucker for anything sweet.'

I wonder if he sits in his car compulsively chomping on HobNobs between arrests. I guess he probably needs some kind of prop, something to sweeten the darkest of days.

'Who am I to deprive you?' I ask him, pleased to be here, but dreading more questions. I need a speedy handbrake turn, something to switch the spotlight back on him. I've got to turn myself into the romantic equivalent of the Gestapo (if it's possible for it to have a romantic equivalent).

'What star sign are you?' I ask before my brain's had time to tell my mouth that I'm no longer twelve years old.

'Do you believe in that stuff?' he asks, eyebrows raised.

No. But I can hardly tell him that now.

‘Er, yes,’ I say hesitantly. ‘I love the stars.’

Jesus. If he ever had any remote interest in me, it must’ve withered on the vine by now.

‘I’m surprised,’ he says. ‘You seem like you’re all about the logic. I’m a Leo. So go on then, Mystic Meg, what am I like?’

Could I *be* more busted?

‘You’re bold and fearless, like a lion,’ I tell him. Surely Leo’s are meant to have leonine qualities? ‘You’re not afraid of conflict and you look good in fur.’

‘You’re right,’ he laughs, ‘I do look good in fur. Perhaps I’ll emigrate and join the Stasi so I can have one of those bearskin hats. Seriously though, what *are* Leo’s meant to be like? You obviously believe in this stuff, you don’t have to humour me just because I think it’s nonsense. You might be right.’

I so agree with him. Every time I see some bovine commuter digesting the words of wisdom of one of those shaggy-haired charlatans on the Tube I want to rip the paper from their hands and force them to see sense. But that’s not what my character thinks. I wish I’d got some thespian hints from Charles before I embarked on this car crash of a date. Stop thinking about Charles!

‘What are you like? Um, you’re honest and brave. You’re focused on what it is that you want. You’re a truth seeker.’

Where did all that come from?

‘Well, that’s very nice of you, Alice,’ he says, smiling. ‘I still think it’s total crap, but at least you’ve given me an ego boost.’

I smile back and decide to stop trying to throw out conversational gambits. It only ends in disaster. Instead I let him lead the dance and we finally find a happy medium, talking about the things we like best about London. We're through pudding before I know it and Ali's signalling for the bill. I get out my maxed-out credit card, but he refuses to take it.

'Please let me pay half,' I beg, mortified by the idea of lying to him and then accepting his offer to stand me dinner.

'Not a chance, Alice. Step away from the purse,' he says.

'Should I put my hands on my head?' I ask him. Am I flirting, and if so, what's my motivation? God, I really am turning into a thesp.

'That won't be necessary and you can't do it on the bike.'

'Oh no, Ali, you don't have to take me home. I can get a cab.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' he says. 'I insist. If it takes me arresting you, I'm going to ensure I get you home.'

Don't joke, it's a definite possibility. We zoom through the cold winter night, surely travelling way too fast. I love it by the river, as long as I'm the right side. There's something so glamorous about the jagged skyline of the embankment, all lit up and extravagant.

We arrive at the house and I disembark awkwardly, despite my supposed prowess at ice skating. Now what? Is it rude if I don't suggest a cup of tea? Is he going to try and kiss me? I fumble in my handbag for my keys as he hovers close by.

'So…' I say, turning towards the house.

'So…' says he, slightly mocking, turning too.

Oh no. The lights are ablaze and the living-room curtains are open. Julia always said it was as though Alice lived in a barn, the way she'd throw open the doors and windows. She hates to feel constricted. As a result, she's illuminated perfectly, perched on the sofa watching the 'Sex and the City' double bill on Paramount. She always tunes in, despite us owning the entire series, because she says it's like a jukebox: you never know which one's coming up. But that's hardly the point right now. If Ali takes a proper look, he'll instantaneously know I'm a twin. There's only one thing for it. I lean in, grabbing him round the waist and plant a kiss on his lips. He's momentarily taken aback, then pulls me into him and turns it into a snog. He slips his hand under my top, pulling me closer. My head's elsewhere, but my mouth's an amnesiac. And who can blame it: he kisses like a world champion. I wasn't expecting any kind of kiss, let alone one as passionate and sexy as this. Enough! I pull away, subtly twisting him back towards the road.

'Thanks for a really fun evening,' I tell him. 'I'm afraid that asking you in is too risky.'

'That's a shame,' he says, pulling me into another clinch. I kiss him straight back until I'm hit by an irrational wave of guilt. If Charles could see me he'd think our frisson meant nothing to me, when in fact it's ongoing agony. I pull away more forcefully and then kiss him on the cheek, hoping it'll read like a full stop. He shrugs his shoulders, all little boy lost, then swings a leg over the bike.

'I'll call you,' he says. 'I had a really great time tonight.'

I keep my eyes focused on him, keen to stop him swivelling back towards the window. Seconds later he's roared off into the night, leaving me to straighten my rumpled clothes and pray that my dignity and criminal record remain intact.

Chapter Eleven

Ali's true to his word – he calls the very next afternoon, but I don't pick up. Partly it's because my mouth's full of pins, partly it's because I'm not sure what to say. Our date was undeniably fun, but maybe more like the fun you'd have with a really good male friend that you hadn't seen in ages (who just happens to be a really good kisser). I didn't have that heart-in-mouth, quivering feeling I get around Charles, a feeling that shows no sign of abating. Now I've experienced it I'm not sure there's any going back. And Ali sure as hell doesn't deserve being treated as a post-Charles test case, not when he's been so badly hurt already. What am I saying? It's not just altruism. The idea I'd have to tell him I've served him up lie pie with cream on the side – right after he's confided about his lying, cheating ex – is too horrific for words.

I've replied with a text, promising to call once work's let up. It needs thought and right now there's no time for thought: I'm way too busy dodging the personal and professional bullets whistling past my ears from every direction. Tarquin barely looks at me, choosing to deal with Gareth whenever possible, while Suzanne talks to me as though I'm some kind of care in the community halfwit, seconded to the production against their will. She

constantly checks up on me, asking me to explain the most basic of decisions. Thank God for Zelda's raft of brilliant suggestions, which are proving utterly invaluable. When I think about how energetic and inspiring she was, I start to believe that she really might be back on side soon. Suzanne certainly seems to think so, claiming she had a very positive conversation with her only last week. But then, she also believed that she was speaking to her from a beach in Rio De Janeiro, so she's probably not best placed to judge.

The last plate that's maniacally spinning is Dad's visit, now a mere thirty-six hours away. Partly I'm looking forward to seeing him, partly I'm dreading the disappointment that feels like an inevitable consequence. He and Alice have a mutual understanding that I don't share – he loves that she's in education, even if it's in a less highfaluting context than him, while Rufus is left basking happily in Julia's uncomplicated adoration. I often feel like a bit of a black sheep, even though Alice swears I'm being paranoid. Perhaps she's right. I'm feeling oddly galvanized by the last few weeks, despite the litany of disasters. If Zelda thinks I'm no longer a duckling, if Charles finds me so darn captivating, surely I've got to have enough about me to properly engage my own father? I'm thinking about temporarily breaking away from the tyranny of feeling like the less interesting half of 'the twins' and crow-barring some time into his diary that's just about me and him. Would seeing him without Alice feel too exposing, or would it allow us to find a long-buried connection we've lost sight of? Maybe it's time to take a risk and find out once and for all.

See how all roads still lead back to Charles? Right now I'm in the production office, putting off the inevitable moment when I have to drive out to location. Tarquin wants to go through my costume ideas for Lady Victoria's birthday ball and both of the stars will be on-set. Emily's requested a meeting, so I can't get away with a flying visit. Charles and I haven't spoken since that fateful night in the pub; all we've done is exchange the odd melting, painful smile. He hasn't so much as texted me, but I'm oddly sanguine about it. He's one of life's goodies and I'm sure he doesn't want to make it any harder for me than it already is. He's someone else's husband, a fact I know I must swallow down obediently, like bitter medicine. But I still can't help mentally toying with the things he said that night, reliving how special he made me feel.

Gareth breaks my reverie, sweeping into the production office weighed down by a roll of lace.

'Très, très glam,' he says, taking in my figure-hugging jersey dress. 'What's the occasion? More police, camera, action?' I hadn't even noticed I was over-dressed: it's positively Pavlovian the way I up the ante when there's the remotest prospect of Charles clapping eyes on me.

'No occasion,' I mutter, embarrassed. 'Is that the trim for the ball gowns?' We're off to Ripon on Monday, where we'll shoot the ball and various other scenes of pseudo opulence at a crumbling stately home.

'The very same. It's the scratchiest nylon ever created. I swear they'll all come out in hives. Maybe we should make Emily some

knickers from it. It might prevent her from getting herself knocked up by that boy-band reject.'

Emily's been all over the tabloids this week, caught on CCTV getting down and dirty with some no-count pop star who's even more primped and highlighted than she is. She claims she's mortified, but she didn't seem remotely distraught when she stopped by the office yesterday. She's recently employed a notorious silver-haired, silver-tongued, permatanned publicist and I suspect this is his opening gambit.

'You're looking quite the dandy yourself,' I say, noticing that Gareth's sporting a red neckerchief, tied at a jaunty angle.

'I was just trying to cheer myself up a bit, but I fear all I've done is make myself look like a dog who's won first prize in an obedience contest.'

'You'd *never* win an obedience contest,' I tell him. Gareth really wouldn't. He got expelled from boarding school for stealing a crate of champagne from the headmaster's Christmas party and it's been a slippery slope ever since. 'I know it's miserable without Zelda here, but it won't be long now. She seemed very confident it was under control when I saw her.'

'Darling, do you really believe your own hype?'

'Yes, yes, I do,' I tell him defensively. 'Zelda wouldn't lie to me.'

'OK, OK, if you say so. Let's descend on her with a casserole or something, à la classic "Neighbours". As a special treat I'll let you be Madge.'

‘Which era though?’ I ask him. ‘The Ramsay years or the Madge Bishop period? I need to feel into my character.’ I stand on tiptoes, eyes closed, pretending to channel my inner Madge.

‘Oh, you’re having hot, hot loving with Harold, no question.’

My eyes spring open in disgust. Gareth always knows how to take a joke one stage too far. He shoos me out of the office, promising to hound Zelda with calls if I bite the bullet and go to location. Overwhelmingly reluctant, I accidentally on purpose leave the map behind, resorting to a circuitous route round the back edges of Willesden. I’m steeling myself to go back to square one – or was it square two? – where I was attempting to exude calm authority. If I really were the costume designer, rather than a last-minute stand-in, my status on this job would be immense. I start imagining one of those cheesy American TV life coaches talking me into the zone. ‘Feel the feelings, live the dream, be what you’ve always wanted to be. You ARE invincible!’ Oops! I slam on the brakes, a whisker away from running a red light. Must remember that my terrible driving doesn’t allow for mental multitasking.

Charles is the first person I see. He’s swinging his Land Rover into the car park, expertly spinning it into a narrow gap. Considering how sexy he is at driving, how unutterably sexy would he be at sex? When he spots me he looks almost startled, which is hardly surprising considering how much I’ve been avoiding set.

‘Oh, hello, Lulu. I was starting to think you’d forgotten all about us.’

Who is the ‘us’ he’s talking about? The ‘us’ always felt like me and him until we stepped over the line.

‘Um, no. I’ve just been busy. Lots of costumes, you know how it is.’

‘Gosh, you’re such a captain of industry. Are you walking over to location?’

Is that it? I know it’s pathetic to feel rejected, but I don’t think I can bear going from intimacy to chummy neutrality with such brutal speed. Although it’s probably our safest option, I can’t help but long for him to acknowledge what’s gone before; to indicate that he pines for me like I pine for him, even if there’s nowhere for it to go. ‘Yes, yes, I am,’ I say in a small voice, wondering how awkward 200 yards could prove to be. Oh boy, it’s awkward. His foppish charm seems to have gone into hibernation and my frozen-over brain can’t even come up with something as uninspired as my Alsatian query. The second assistant director – a chirpy blonde who wears her walkie-talkie like a fashion accessory – delivers us from the conversational quagmire.

‘Charles, make-up are desperate for you.’

He smiles gratefully, setting off after her retreating back.

‘Bye, Lulu, see you soon.’ I look at him, forcing a smile. ‘Sorry,’ he mouths, leaving me totally flummoxed. Sorry for what? For kissing me? For (not) talking to me like he’s never met me before? I desperately need Alice to help with the Polish translation, but my pride still won’t allow me to admit to my own idiocy.

Tarquin's a little less frosty than he's been in recent days, even managing to compliment me on a couple of the designs I show him. I desperately need to make up with him, however much it sticks in my craw.

'What's your template for the ball?' I ask him. 'What's the grand plan?' I'm hoping the 'grand' will subliminally massage his enormous ego.

'Aw, dunno, Lulu,' he says, suddenly coming over a little Mockney. There's a new Guy Ritchie film out this week, I'm sure it's no coincidence. 'I want it to be bold and brash, you know?' Tarquin's the master of meaningless hyperbole. 'Kind of like *Star Wars*.'

Star Wars?! What possible relationship can there be between *Star Wars* and our bonnets-on-a-budget extravaganza?

'I see,' I say uncomprehendingly, nodding sagely to play for time.

'Yeah, like utterly surprising.' He's thrashing his arms around for emphasis. 'There's so much underlying conflict – rich and poor, men and women. It's a battle as well as a ball! It should be visually mesmerizing, Lulu.'

'I'm sure it will be.'

'I guarantee it, my old china.' My old china?! 'It's good to kick it around with you, get some juice into it. I've always said you're the brains on this shoot. I was telling Suzanne that only this week.'

He's such a bullshit artist. But who am I to talk, casting him looks of heartfelt admiration as he spouts his faux auteur nonsense? A flash of fear strikes me as I consider whether or not my choice of

career means a compulsory pact with the devil. Leave your soul at the door, do not pass go. Ali flashes into my mind momentarily, a man who's utterly confident in the fact he's doing good. Perhaps he'll be the saint with the clipboard turning me away from Peter's Pearly Gates when the time comes.

Either way, I'm glad Tarquin's perked up, and all Emily requires is a bit of reassurance that she's going to be the hottest bitch at the ball.

'I just know what colours suit me, you know?' she says, head winsomely tilted to one side. 'Aquamarine brings out my eyes like you wouldn't believe.'

I don't have the heart to tell her she'll be dressed in magenta.

'The thing is, Emily, you've got such a versatile look that you can carry off a huge range of shades. It's very rare, in fact.'

'Really?' she says. 'Thank you, darling! You always make me feel you've got my back. I don't care what anyone says, you're brilliant.'

What *does* everyone say? Does the whole crew hate me? Do even my own team think I'm a rank amateur? I pull myself together: if I stay here much longer I'm going to get as self-centred as Emily. I need the normality of home; the steady rhythm of my relationship with Alice, forged a million miles away from the maddening hall of mirrors that is the television industry. I head back to the car. Even so, I can't help but look back, wondering if Charles will suddenly appear from nowhere. A part of me longs to see him – to glean more of where he's at and undo the awkwardness of earlier – but the wiser part of me knows it's the last thing I need.

The traffic's Friday-night terrible and it's gone nine by the time I get back. I thought Alice would be out with Richard, but she's hunched over her laptop in her tracksuit bottoms.

'I have to pick a night,' she says disconsolately. 'He's got someone else covering for him tomorrow so he said he'd have to work tonight.'

'Are you OK about him meeting Dad so soon? It's only been a few weeks…'

'I know, but Dad only pitches up once in a blue moon. I really think me and Richard have got something, and if I don't introduce them this time it'll be forever.'

'Mm,' I say non-committally, worried she's going to terrify the hell out of him. But maybe I'm behaving like some self-hating misogynist, assuming that all men need to be subtly lured into the forest of commitment with a trail of emotional breadcrumbs. After all, he's agreed to come. Surely that's a good sign?

'I'm so glad you're back!' says Alice, enthusiastically sploshing about half a bottle of wine into a glass for me. 'I'm actually surfing Facebook on a Friday night. You know how it is when you get a boyfriend, you completely forget how you entertained yourself when you were single.'

'Er, being Jenna's wing-woman on some misjudged bar crawl? Snogging classroom assistants in that pound-a-pint pub in Mare Street?'

'Yeah, that's about the size of it. God, why are we never single at the same time? *Pl-e-e-e-a-se* give Ali another once over.'

‘What, so we can go on double dates? They’ll probably have to take place in the exercise yard at Holloway, you realize.’

‘No,’ says Alice, laughing, ‘not just to make me happy! Because he sounds sweet.’

‘His sweetness is partly the problem. He’d probably refuse to watch “America’s Next Top Model” because it encourages conflict.’

‘But the back-stabbing’s the best part!’

‘Exactly!’

‘I’m just worried about you,’ says Alice pleadingly. ‘It’s nearly four months since you and Steve broke up and you’re still behaving like a nun.’ She’s looking at me in a way that tells me that she’s been storing this up, chewing it over. ‘You must be obsessing about it, but not telling me cos you think it’s boring. But you never bore me, Lulu. I hate it when you bottle stuff up.’

‘It’s not that…’ I say, pausing. My reasons for not confiding are wearing increasingly thin, particularly as it’s well and truly over. Maybe I should just take the plunge and deal with her wrath about the fact I’ve kept such a major secret. ‘It’s more complicated than you realize.’

‘It’s NOT complicated,’ says Alice bossily. ‘He’s not remotely good enough. I want you to be with someone where it’s straightforward, someone who gets how great you are and loves you for it.’

And in a heartbeat I’m reminded how much Alice loves simplicity. Two plus two equals four. That’s why I’ve kept schtum, and why it remains the best policy. I can’t explain my mangled, illogical feelings to myself, let alone to her.

‘We need to get out there more,’ she says, running on. ‘I’ll ugly twin it up and we’ll go out and find someone for you. We haven’t gone out dancing for weeks.’

I hate dancing. I’ve got at least three left feet. Put Alice on a dance floor, meanwhile, and it’s like Bianca Jagger taking to the floor at Studio 54.

‘Or we could go to one of those late-night gallery openings full of clever single people who can talk about Impressionism.’

‘They’ll have beards, I can feel it in my bones,’ I say. ‘It’ll be fine, Alice, I know it will. I’ve – I’ve just been working so hard and…’

‘Yeah and it sounds like there’s no one remotely hot and single on this job.’

‘No, quite,’ I agree, a little too emphatically. Oh, the irony.

‘It’s just… it’s making me really happy having someone again, and…’

Why is she hurling all her eggs into Richard’s basket with such alacrity? I’m hearing how happy she says she is, but I’m sensing an undercurrent of self-delusion. Is she more smitten with the idea of a boyfriend than Richard himself? There are a few too many booty calls and not enough wining and dining for my liking. He’s constantly using the off-licence as a reason to be unavailable, but I can’t help wondering if it’s an excuse. Meanwhile, Alice seems to be convincing herself that he’s Islington’s answer to Rhett Butler.

‘Oh God, I’m so bored of talking about myself,’ I say. ‘What the hell are you doing on Facebook, anyway? You hate it.’

‘I know, I wish I’d never gone near it. There are loads of messages thanking us for the party, which is nice, but then there’re about four people I’d never be friends with in the real world asking to be my friend.’

‘That’s what I hate about it. It completely denigrates the meaning of friendship.’ I giggle. ‘How old do I sound? Maybe I’ll write a letter to the *Telegraph*.’

‘No, you’re right. That kid in my class, Marco, his dad just poked me! How can that ever be appropriate? And Pam from school who we never even liked threw a palm tree at me because she’s going on holiday. How stupid is that? If she actually threw a palm tree at me, I’d be suing her for assault. It’s a fantasist’s paradise.’

I peer over her shoulder. ‘It says you can rub suntan lotion into Pam’s back though.’

‘Eurgh. Do you remember how spotty she always was? But, Lulu, this is worse.’

She clicks her mouse and brings up Jenna’s page. Her picture’s all tits and teeth, and her single status is emblazoned for all to see. ‘She’s become a fan of pizza! How pointless is that? She goes mental when there’s no one to obsess about. But it’s not just her, look, there are 269,152 other losers worshipping dough.’

‘Just commit Facebook suicide,’ I tell her. ‘It’s like a porn habit you can’t crack.’

‘I know, I know…’

But there’s no denying it’s addictive. Soon we’re trawling it for exes and laying into a second bottle of wine. Ali texts around

midnight, by which time I'm most definitely drunk.

> Couriered Alan a dozen red roses, will that do? Work letting up yet? I'm around next weekend if you are.

When I explain the context, Alice declares the text comic genius, and before I know it I've sent a tentative acceptance to his invitation. Now I'll just have to stay drunk so I don't get tangled up in the implications.

It's well past two a.m. by the time we get to bed, meaning I'm far from bright and bushy-tailed when I wake up. Maybe this is the head I was aiming for, the muzziness cancelling out my stupid, illogical anxiety about seeing my own father. I sneak 'Gossip Girl' into the DVD player until Alice's determined vacuuming guilt trips me into action. She's faffing around with the latest Jamie Oliver book, veering between insane ideas like making pasta from scratch and roasting whole suckling pigs. I beg her to settle for a simple pasta sauce, but she totally dismisses my input, eventually deciding on aubergine parmigiana. The afternoon's spent in a fug of oily smoke, frying endless slices of the accursed things, monotony only broken by the various errands that Alice sends me out on. I can tell she's ridiculously stressed, even though she flatly denies it, snapping at me for buying the wrong kind of mozzarella and refusing to let Jenna come round for a 'chat'.

I don't rise to the provocation, blaming her mood on understandable nerves about introducing her new squeeze to our (sort of) parents. I take on table-laying duties to allow her a good

hour of beautification prior to Richard's arrival. Dad and Julia turn up on the doorstep dead on seven, bearing a dodgy-looking bottle of wine and some droopy chrysanthemums.

'Hello, darling,' says Dad, giving me a brisk kiss and handing the wine to me. 'I'm afraid the local amenities leave a lot to be desired, hence the plonk.'

'Oh, Andrew!' says Julia, rolling her eyes, all mock conspiratorial with me. 'It seems like a good spot to me. Much better than your last place.'

'Come in, come in,' I say as Alice comes bounding down the stairs.

'Hello, Daddy!' she says, giving him a hug. I don't know if Julia clocks my confliction as I witness them, but she swiftly links an arm through mine and asks for a tour of the rest of the house. I'm well aware what she's really after – the lowdown on what's cooking – so I start with the kitchen. Soon she's sticking her head in the oven, inspecting the parmigiana and congratulating me on the baby baked potatoes.

'Much, much better than relying on wheat. I'm so glad I wasn't such a wicked stepmother that you learnt nothing from me! You do still always remember how vital it is to obey the call to stool, don't you, Lulu?' Oh God, why must she do this?

'Erm, yes – obviously,' I tell her, yanking her away from the oven and leading her up the stairs.

'Good, good. It's the key to a healthy colon,' she says, beaming with pleasure. I try to distract her by asking about Rufus, who she's already spent an evening with.

‘I’m desperately curious about this girlfriend of his,’ she says. ‘What are your thoughts?’

‘She’s nice, I think. They seem very affectionate.’

‘I know this will sound a bit ridiculous, but him bringing a girl home feels like a milestone.’

You can say that again: I almost ask her if she shared our suspicions that he was a friend of Dorothy, but it seems kind of inappropriate.

‘And now Alice has got a beau in tow too!’ she continues. ‘What about you, Lulu? Are you going to bed with anyone at the moment?’ Where does she get these bizarre phrases? It’s a hangover from her early, tentative stabs at stepmotherhood, where she’d nervously drop in a question or a word of advice and then run away from it like it was an unexploded bomb. Ghastly tweens that we were, we could smell fear and would ruthlessly mock her bumbling advances. I momentarily imagine how much Charles’s children would hate me if they knew how much I long for their dad, then chastise myself for straying into such forbidden territory.

‘Er, no, not really. I’m dating,’ I tell her, hoping it makes me sound glamorous and mysterious. Luckily Julia’s been burnt far too many times to attempt emotional keyhole surgery.

‘Good, good,’ she says. ‘I’m sure someone super is lurking round the corner, ready to pounce.’

I’m both glad and sad that she’s backed off. I wonder if Mum was still here whether I’d be pouring out the whole truth, nothing but the truth, to her? Sometimes it feels like she’s been reduced to a

smudgy photocopy, a faint trace of the vital, complex woman who once existed. Who was she really? It's so easy to idealize her, but how different would my memories be if she'd lived a few more years and had to try her hand at dealing with our secretive, moody teenage incarnations? We were only just in double figures when we lost her, still so simple to nurture.

'It's lovely, Lulu, really lovely,' says Julia. I can see her mentally cataloguing the random detritus on my dressing table, analysing the clues. Julia's a secret snoop, always looking for the answers she can't prise out of us. A knock on the door signals Rufus's arrival, giving me the perfect excuse to gently hustle her out.

I hug him hello, fighting a creeping suspicion that he's a replicant. He looks almost like my brother, smells almost like my brother, but somehow isn't my brother. Gone are the inevitably uncool jeans, seamlessly replaced by a pair of smart black trousers. His Pixies T-shirt's been consigned to the wash basket, overthrown by an actual shirt, with buttons. Even that comforting top note of unwashed man has been expunged; now it's aftershave all the way. He's got the evil puppet master in tow, who's charm personified. 'Mrs Godwin!' she says, double-kissing Julia. 'What a complete pleasure to meet you.' Julia blushes pink with delight as Dinah turns her attentions to Dad, scoring a total blinder with an enquiry about a paper he's just published. Once he's given her a précis, he claps his hands as if to bring us to order.

'Shall we eat?' he asks, a tad impatiently. 'Smells delicious.'

‘Um, I just wanted to wait for Richard to arrive,’ says Alice hesitantly. ‘I’m sure he’ll be here any second.’

‘Let’s give him fifteen minutes or so,’ he concedes, ‘but we are still on East Coast time.’

‘Oh, Mr Godwin, you must try my travel tincture!’ pipes up Dinah. ‘It knocks out jet lag in a heartbeat. When I went to Maine in the summer I was sparkling right from the off.’

‘Do call me Andrew,’ says Dad, looking positively tickled by how solicitous she is.

‘Dad, has Alice shown you the rest of the house? Do you want a quick tour while we wait for Richard?’

‘Don’t worry, Lulu, she’s shown me downstairs and I don’t have any great need to poke around your bedrooms.’ He tempers it with a smile, but I’m illogically stung by it.

‘Oh, OK. How long are you here for anyway? Are you doing something ground-breaking with test tubes or inventing a cure for something hideous?’

Why am I so incapable of talking about his work in an adult way? It’s like I define myself as the airhead offspring who doesn’t understand its true significance. He smiles patronizingly.

‘Just a week, I’m afraid. I’m addressing a conference in Oxford and accepting an honorary fellowship.’

‘I’m going to go and see him speak!’ adds Rufus proudly. I think about offering to come too, before realizing that there’s no way my work schedule would allow it. Or that I’d understand a word he was saying. I might as well try to sit an A level in Estonian folklore.

‘I’ve been filming near Oxford,’ I tell him.

‘Yeah,’ says Alice, ‘you won’t believe what a step up Lulu’s taken. She’s the queen of bonnets.’

‘Ooh, is it like “Pride and Prejudice”?’ says Julia. I ramble on about how low rent it is and how much over budget I’ve gone, totally denigrating my contribution for no accountable reason. Still, at least it fills the gap before Richard deigns to make an appearance. Alice positively beams when he comes through the door, his lateness instantly forgiven. She leads him over to Dad like he’s a thoroughbred stallion. Dad inspects him over the top of his glasses and administers a brief, sharp handshake.

We’ve made asparagus to start with, a layer of melty Swiss cheese over the top. Dinah puts a dainty hand on my arm as I’m dishing up.

‘Lulu, would you mind awfully if I had it without the asparagus?’ The cheese is literally welded to it by now.

‘It’s kind of integral,’ I say, rather at a loss.

‘Is it the way it makes your wee smell of burnt rubber which puts you off?’ asks Julia jollily. ‘I know it’s rather pungent, but the nutritional value more than makes up for it!’

Dinah looks taken aback. ‘No, I just don’t really like it. It’s absolutely fine, I’ll have some bread.’

I take a few spears back to the kitchen and try to melt the cheese back off over the hob, managing to burn the ends in the process. Soon the smoke alarm’s ringing out and I’m dancing round the kitchen with a wet tea towel looking like a drunken morris dancer.

‘So no actual fire then?’ says Dad, appearing from next door. He smiles at me, reaching his long body upward to stop the hellish siren.

‘No fire, just a one-woman fondue,’ I say, indicating the blackened asparagus, burning cheese spilling off it.

It’s a nice feeling having him there, doing something fatherly and protective (even if it’s as lacking in jeopardy as saving me from the curse of boiling cheese). Seeing him stretching up, I’m suddenly reminded of what a giant he seemed when we were tiny, and how we used to get him to chase us around the garden shouting ‘Fe-Fi-Fo-Fum’. Mum used to hate that game because of how hyper and over-excited we’d end up. I think about asking him if he remembers, but while I’m still formulating the question he retreats back to his place at the head of the table.

Conversation putters along, with Julia questioning Richard about the off-licence (the cogs visibly turning as she tots up his units) and Rufus asking Dad keen questions about his presentation. It suddenly seems so superficial. As per normal, my mind wanders to Charles, thinking about how baldly honest *he* was that night in the pub. I loved how unfettered he was, how jaggedly truthful he was about what he was feeling. I love my Dad and I’m simply going to tell him what’s on my mind.

I clumsily cut across Dinah, who’s treating us all to a rundown of her dressage trophies.

‘Dad?’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you remember that game we used to play? When you chased us around pretending to be a giant? And how Mum would try and stop you cos it meant we wouldn’t go to sleep?’ There’s a pause as everyone tries to catch up with my complete non sequitur.

‘That’s right!’ he says, a smile wreathing his face. ‘You were such little terrors at that age, always swapping your clothes to try and fox us.’

‘What else do you remember?’ I continue eagerly.

‘Oh, London life seems like an aeon ago,’ he says, suddenly dismissive. ‘Can’t imagine how we lived here when I look back.’

For London, read Mum. I look over at Julia, wondering if he’s frightened that memories of his life before her will make her feel displaced. She’s silent, watching nervously.

‘Well it was, but –’

‘Can I have a little more of your parmigiana?’ says Dad, clearly keen to change the subject. ‘I had no idea you’d become such culinary stars in our absence.’

Alice beams with pleasure, oblivious to how smoothly he’s dispatched our early lives to the vault. Meanwhile Dinah’s busy scraping the mozzarella off the top of her parmigiana and stacking it neatly at the side of her plate. Course One suggested she liked cheese, but obviously her relationship with it is more complicated than it first appears. She spots me looking. ‘It’s delicious!’ she says with a theatrical roll of the eyes. ‘Mmm!’

Grumpy and dispirited, I stomp to the kitchen to retrieve pudding. Conversation buzzes merrily behind me, but it just sounds like

noise. Maybe I'm the freak, not them, with this sudden craving for visceral mental connection. It's like I'm experiencing all the emotional intensity of falling in love but without the other person there to play it out with. Am I going to start spontaneously demanding bus drivers give up their deepest fears and desires to me because I can't ask it of Charles? Richard helpfully follows me through with some plates and I start to wonder if I've been too judgemental. That's until he slips on the wet tea towel, breaking a plate and unleashing a stream of swear words which wouldn't sound out of place on a pirate ship.

'God, sorry. Are you OK?' I ask. 'I must've dropped it when I was trying to make the smoke alarm stop.'

'Would it've been so much trouble to just PICK IT UP?!' he snarls.

'Baby, what happened?' says Alice, rushing in. 'Did you cut your hand?'

He's not six! I want to cry out. He's certainly not six in swearing years. Alice is fussing round him now, kissing it better and stroking his angry face.

'I'm fine, honey,' he says, putting an arm around her waist and smiling beatifically. I beat a hasty retreat before my expression gives me away, chucking down the pudding plates like I'm dealing cards. It's gone ten and I can see Dad starting to yawn.

'Are you flagging, Dad?' He nods a tired assent. 'Will we see you again before you go?'

'You girls could come and have tea at the hotel on Tuesday,' he says, unaware how impossible that would be. I think again about

my idea of trying to get him on his own, but I'm too self-conscious to suggest it.

'I'm in Ripon next week,' I say, 'though I'll be back by Sunday. Perhaps I could –'

'Sunday's out. We're driving to Farnham to see Julia's parents.' He looks round at Rufus, who nods that he's coming: maybe I should just tag along? But then I think about spending my one day off with a couple of dreary old crumblies I'm not even related to and swiftly dismiss it. I might as well just drive a tea trolley down our street and see who invites me in.

'You'll just have to come to Boston instead,' he adds.

'I will, Dad,' I tell him, determined to follow my good intentions through, despite my irritation. 'I promise.'

Conversation is stopped dead by the shrill shriek of a car alarm. Dad goes racing out of the door, only to find the back window of his rented Prius smashed to smithereens. 'Christ, this is why I hate London!' he shouts. Disastrously he's left a briefcase in the boot filled with papers relating to his talk. They're of absolutely no use to a thief, but critical to him. He's puce with rage, all set to call 999.

'Dad, it's not 999 for this kind of thing, it's the local number,' I tell him cautiously. 'I'll look it up in the book.'

'This kind of thing never happens at home!' he fumes. 'London's like a sewer nowadays.'

An unwarranted wave of anger spreads through me and I think about picking apart his beloved 'home' – asking him about the crime

rate in Detroit or South Central LA – but I realize it's not the time. Richard, meanwhile, is beside himself at stumbling upon an opportunity to vent his rage.

'They should string them up,' he fulminates. 'All this softly-softly shit: they need to know who's boss. At least when there was hanging there was a proper deterrent.'

I look round to see if anyone else is reacting to his psychotic ranting, but everyone's poised to hear if Dad's got through to the police. He's left on hold for half an hour, frustration spiralling out of control. Julia pats his hand, smiles comfortingly, but there's nothing anyone can do. When he eventually does get through he's given short shrift.

'Are you not even going to bother coming out?' he asks incredulously. 'What earthly use is a crime reference number?'

Pleading, claiming national importance: nothing works. Richard offers to take the phone, quivering with anticipation, but Dad thankfully declines. Oh God, why did this have to happen? He'll always associate this evening, and London itself, with this horrible event. He's obsessing about it now, trying to think if there's anything useful to be done, any way of breaking down the police's total lack of interest. Could I? Would he?

'Dad,' I start hesitantly. 'There is someone I could call for advice…'

It seems wrong to ask a favour from Ali before I've confessed my crime, but I really want to do something to show Dad that I'm more savvy than he realizes. There's probably nothing to be done, but if

Dad heard it from the horse's mouth his busy, feverish brain might start to simmer down. He's willing to try anything right now, so I take my mobile outside and call Ali. His voice goes up with pleasure when he answers.

'Hey, you!' he says. 'Have those slave driver bosses given you Saturday night off? My shift's just finished if you're around for a beer.'

'Can you just stay in policeman mode for five more minutes?' I ask him. 'I wanna ask your advice.'

'I'm all yours.'

And I run him through the whole sorry mess, somehow managing to take a verbal diversion via the burning asparagus and the smoke alarm. Eventually he cuts across me.

'Alice, the best thing is if I just swing by, talk your dad through a few things and have a poke round a couple of the front gardens. It's more than possible the cheeky bugger's just given up and ditched the thing.'

'Do you think? That's a brilliant idea. We can start looking now.'

'No, just hang on. I don't want you digging round deep, dark holes without me there. I'll get straight in the car and be there in twenty minutes.'

And that's when I realize it's time for the truth. Quite apart from the fact that keeping my raggle-taggle family in line with the lie is more than I can face, I cannot bear to exploit his authenticity and kindness a moment longer.

'Ali?'

‘Yes?’

‘That’s the thing… You might want to keep me on loud speaker when you’re driving. You might even want to turn round when you hear what I’ve got to say.’

‘And why would that be?’

Here goes.

‘Because I lied to you and you’re the last person who deserves lying to. And I didn’t want to make a fool of you, I was just being a coward and I –’

Ali makes me start from the beginning, listening without interruption as I describe my sorry behaviour. There’s silence when I’ve finished.

‘Ali? Are you in a lay-by with your handbook working out what to charge me with?’

‘Forget it,’ he snaps tersely. ‘I thought you were lying about something, just didn’t know what. I wondered if you had a boyfriend hidden away somewhere, never thought of a twin.’

‘How’d you know I was lying?’ I ask him gingerly.

‘Lot of nose scratching going on, some head cocking. You get to know these things in a job like mine.’

‘Oh, OK,’ I say. ‘I’m really, really –’

‘Let’s just deal with the job in hand.’

He’s on the doorstep in no time, blue light flashing. There’s no kiss hello, just calm efficiency. He apologizes for the Met’s lack of interest, but explains how hamstrung they are, somehow managing to get Dad to see it in similar terms to his overstretched academic

resources. Explanation over, he strides towards the door to start the search.

'I need a rough idea of the area – alleyways, garages, that kind of thing.'

Dad cuts in. 'We can't possibly expect you to navigate your way around a strange area. Lulu can show you the ropes, unless you think it's too dangerous? Maybe I should come along too, rather than hanging around hoping the local bobbies will call back.'

'No!' I say hysterically. Everyone bar Alice looks at me oddly. 'Um, no. Ali and I will be absolutely fine.'

Ali glowers at me, but gruffly agrees. Meanwhile Julia's eyes are darting back and forth, trying to divine if I could possibly have gone to bed with him. I babble on, hoping to distract her.

'Besides, I'm terribly tough. Remember that year of judo we did in 1992? I must be at least a beige belt.'

Alice nods, clearly unable to speak for fear of laughing.

'Shall we get on?' says Ali, patently unimpressed. I totter after him, realizing too late I should've changed out of open-toed high heels. Why did I glam up so much? I guess I'm all about costume, even when there's no earthly point.

'Wait up!' I shout after him.

'Why, so you can humiliate me a little bit more? Did you really do all of that to get off a speeding fine?'

'No, of course not.'

'Then why did you bother? Have you and your sister got some weird sex cult going on in that cute wee house of yours? Few dead

firemen stowed in the dungeon?'

He's stopped to poke around in a bush, refusing to make eye contact. I stand behind him, stomping my stiletto-clad feet like a shire horse in a futile attempt to keep warm.

'I went on a date with you because you asked me, and –'

He whips round, cutting across me.

'That's one hell of a compliment. Do you go on a date with any chancer who asks you out, or just the ones in uniform?'

'Hang on, I hadn't finished. You asked me, and I liked you and I thought we had a bit of zing, even on a dark street corner in deepest South London. And please bear in mind that I hate South London.'

'Zing, is that what you call it?' He's set off again now, leaving me to hobble uselessly after him. 'I thought we had a bit of "zing" too, but judging by how long it's taken you to call me back, the zing's well and truly worn off for you.'

'It hasn't…' I say, feeling disloyal to Charles all over again. I want to reassure Ali with so much more vigour than this, but I'm not sure it would be honest. 'That's why I agreed to a second date.'

'Very gracious,' he says, striding on. 'But don't worry, you're off the hook.'

I look at his retreating back, wishing I could make him realize that, despite the lies, I have nothing but respect for him. He radiates integrity in a way that I clearly don't. As I'm trying to formulate a response, he swerves off down an alley running round the back of the houses.

‘I didn’t even know this was here,’ I say, before being stopped in my tracks by a rat running past me, filthy paws close enough to paint my toenails. Before I can help myself, I emit a blood-curdling shriek. Ali spins round, racing towards me, reaching for his truncheon.

‘Lulu, Jesus, what is it? Did you see the guy?’

‘It was – it was…’

He grabs me around the shoulders.

‘Which way did he go?’

‘It was a… a rat.’

He uncouples himself, exasperated.

‘Oh, for God’s sake, you’re being ridiculous. There’s rats everywhere, Lulu. For your information, the bubonic plague died out more than a century ago.’

‘I know that, I just really hate them. They’ve got those long, fat tails and –’

‘Can we just get this over with?’

He sets off back down the path, shining his torch around all the nooks and crannies. Right at the end of the path we finally spot the briefcase, slung under a tree and decorated with a light coating of dog faeces. Luckily Julia spares us an analysis of the dog’s probable diet when we get back to the house. The papers are all contained within and Dad’s effusively grateful.

‘My pleasure,’ says Ali. ‘Glad I could prove to you the Met’s not a total waste of your daughters’ taxes.’

‘Do you want to stay for a drink?’ I ask him pleadingly, utterly mortified by it all.

‘I’m on earlies,’ he says with a brief smile. ‘I’m gonna go.’

I scuttle after him, trapping him on the doorstep.

‘Thank you so much for doing this. I know you must think I’m just another piece of evidence for why women can’t be trusted, but I really did love that evening.’

‘Did you now?’ he says tersely. ‘So did I.’ He gives a brief shrug, before disappearing back into his panda car and driving away.

When I get back inside, Dad and Julia are gathering their things together in preparation for leaving.

‘What a drama!’ says Julia.

‘Very quick thinking of you, Lulu,’ says Dad.

‘It was all Ali,’ I say. ‘But I’m glad I could help.’ Warmed by his approval, I follow him out into the hall where he’s looking for his coat.

‘Dad, maybe we could meet up again before you go.’

‘I’d like that, but I thought we’d established –’

‘I know, but I just wonder if there is some window we haven’t thought of. I’d love to ask you some stuff, about when we were young, about Mum…’ I pause as I see his expression folding in on itself, face closing.

‘If something opens up when you and Alice are free, then that would be fine.’

‘I was thinking of just us…’ I continue lamely.

‘Let’s see how the time goes. But it sounds like the dresses are proving quite onerous at the moment.’

Perhaps I’m projecting, but it feels like the tone of voice he uses to describe my work is about as dismissive as it’s possible to be. I step away from the whole enterprise, feeling roundly rejected. I kiss him goodbye, eyes stinging, and join Alice on the doorstep to wave them all off. Once the car’s rounded the corner we disappear back inside. Richard’s crashing around upstairs, ablutions as angry as all his other actions. A hard jet of urine noisily hits porcelain like a water cannon decimating a peace protest. Teeth next, ground into submission by a brush applied with the delicacy of a circular saw.

‘That was action-packed!’ says Alice, hurriedly gathering up the glasses so she can get upstairs. ‘And I’m warning you that you’re not going to get away with letting Ali slip through your fingers. Not on my watch.’

I can’t even engage with the whole Ali debacle quite yet. I’m still smarting about how remote Dad was when I tried to make a connection. Considering how little we see of him, the least he could do is be available when he is here. I bet he wouldn’t have been so quick to discount Rufus or Alice. She’s hurling the glasses in the dishwasher now, but is brought up short by how silent I am.

‘What is it, fat face?’ she says. ‘It was OK, wasn’t it?’

‘I just feel like he doesn’t like me!’ I blurt out. ‘And why does he act like Mum never even existed? She’s half of us, for God’s sake.’

‘Oh, Lulu, don’t be so oversensitive,’ says Alice. ‘It wasn’t the time, that’s all. And thinking he doesn’t like you is crazy.’ She grins

at me. ‘How could anyone not like you? He loves you.’

‘I know he loves me, I’m just not sure he likes me.’

‘How can he love you and not like you? You can’t make that distinction.’

‘Yes I can. It’s like the difference between loving someone and being in love with them. It’s on the same axis, but it’s completely different.’

‘You’re being really unfair on him…’ she snaps, two flashes of red lighting up her cheeks.

I look at her, feeling a corrosive distance between us. Anything that feels too emotionally complex, too threatening, just can’t be contemplated. Doesn’t she realize that safety comes at a price?

‘Alice, I need to get up really early,’ shouts vile Richard, saving us from plunging into the perilous terrain that’s opening up between us.

‘OK, sweetie,’ she calls back. ‘Why do you have to make things so over-complicated?’ she hisses.

‘I don’t know why I bothered,’ I snarl, grabbing the dregs of my wine and stomping off into the garden. I’m never pleased to be parted from Alice, but right now a week in the Yorkshire Dales is sounding like the perfect prescription.

Chapter Twelve

‘How much would I have to pay you to eat that pickled egg?’ asks Gareth.

We’re in a skanky café deep in the Midlands, trying to find something edible to snack on en route to Ripon.

‘Million pounds. Look how grey it is. God knows how farty the yolk would taste.’

‘Seriously, Lulu, how much?’

‘Um, fifty quid.’

‘Oh, come on, you’d do it for forty. That’s twenty whole copies of *Grazia* with enough change for a Toblerone.’

‘I’m not a prostitute!’

‘I’m not asking you to have sex for money.’

‘It’s basically the same thing. You’re still asking me to sell my body. It’s just it’s my taste buds instead of my fanny.’

This is the kind of inane discussion that can keep Gareth and I amused for hours. After years spent holed up in the wardrobe caravan or tearing up the motorway, we’ve learnt just how low we need to go to pass the time. We compromise on two bags of crisps and some digestives – if Julia saw what dietary carnage this job wreaked she’d have me extradited – and head back to the car.

I should be dreading this trip: the director and the producer think I'm a moron, I'm desperately over-budget, I've snogged the (very) married leading man and the female star's a ten-carat diva. In practice there's a part of me that's filled with a destructive excitement. I'm glad to escape the gloopy familial soup that's been causing me so much stress and illogically thrilled to be exiled with Charles. I know I can't have him, but I still love being around him and a trip away makes it unavoidable. My sensible side won out in London, keeping me safely locked away in the production office, but now we're out on the wild prairies my inner hedonist is demanding an audience. And with Alice and I uncharacteristically alienated, it feels like there's no one around to keep her in check.

But perhaps I'm taking it all too much to heart. Alice has got love goggles on and cannot bear to engage with anything that contrasts with her blissed-out view of humanity. If only Richard was remotely worthy, but the more I observe, the more convinced I am that he's not. She seems to spend her whole time hanging around in full make-up, waiting for him to finish work. I wish she'd demand more of him, but instead she seems to run around doing his bidding like some kind of 1950s throwback, to the point where she even delivered him a hot dinner on Sunday night. Let's hope she'll eventually wake up to the fact that he's Mr Right Now, not Mr Right. It's definitely not the moment to broach it; we've been scratchy and irritable since the row we had after the dinner, bickering about tiny domestic details like who's first in the shower.

There's no doubt that the other end of the country is the best place for me as there's absolutely nothing to keep me in London. I sent Ali the longest, most apologetic text I could muster, receiving a terse '*Don't worry about it x*' in response. The single *x* suggests he perhaps doesn't think I'm the devil incarnate, although he totally ignored my suggestion that I take him out and make it up to him. Perhaps it's best he did; it's an ambiguous suggestion and ambiguity is all I can offer right now.

It's gone eleven by the time Gareth and I reach Ripon. We're staying twenty miles outside, deep in the wilds of Yorkshire, which tests our navigation skills to the max. It all feels a bit like 'Scooby Doo' as I steer my little Peugeot down deep, dark country roads, praying that we don't break down and get eaten by wolves. Despite my myriad crimes, my head of department status has afforded me a whole cottage of my own, tucked away down a windy lane. I'm thrilled when I finally get there, after dropping Gareth off at his guest house. It's absolutely tiny, but the log fire and Aga combo immediately make it feel like home. I collapse into my comfy bed, craving my measly five hours of sleep. But for some reason sleep is elusive. The aloneness feels unnerving, unfamiliar; what would happen if a wolf came in through the cat flap? Every time I start to drop off I begin to imagine noises from downstairs, and end up snatching a couple of hours with the light on.

The call time is five a.m. and I arrive on-set bleary-eyed and desperate for coffee. We're shooting exteriors today, right at the top of a hill. Emily's meant to fall to her knees and weep, utterly pole-

axed by the fact she can't be with Charles. I mean, Sir Percy. Right now I'm feeling for the make-up girls, who'll be pleading with her not to coat her eyelashes in thick mascara. Period accuracy is not her strong suit.

The view from here is amazing, but the driving wind is making it incredibly difficult to set up Tarquin's first shot. He's stomping around in a matt black anorak, casting dark looks at the camera team and swearing to himself in Italian. In Italian? Has he dropped the Guy Ritchie moniker in favour of Fellini? I smile tentatively at him and he gestures me over.

'We might need weather cover,' he says. 'I'm hoping your team are prepped and ready with costumes if we have to shoot the arrival part of the ball scene.'

'Scene seventy-four?' I say, shocked. I'm sure that the schedule dictates that we'll shoot a simple conversation between Percy and his mother, Lady Agatha, if the weather's bad. My team are still stitching polyester ball gowns like they're going out of fashion (which they are, incidentally).

'Fuck the schedule. All the cast are up here anyway so I can go off piste. I have to trust my mood, Lulu, and what I've been working on is emotional flagellation. I don't want any repressed, quivering, posh-boy rubbish from *Charles*.' He's waving his arms around again, lost in his own genius. 'I want an explosion of pent-up pain!'

Maybe *he's* in pain. I'm certainly in pain listening to him. Much as I've been avoiding her, the person I now need on side is Suzanne. There's no way I can deliver on scene 74 and my beleaguered

reputation can't stand any more on-set humiliation. She's in Emily's winnebago, intermittently freezing her tits off by ducking outside for a drag on her inevitable fag. I don't think I've ever seen her without a cigarette hanging off her hand. I wonder if she rigs a huge one up over her bed at night to suckle on like an enormous nipple.

I swear I'm psychic: a momentary chat in a cloud of smoke establishes that she's having the exact argument that I predicted about mascara. It doesn't look like she's going to win it any time soon. Maybe this is my chance to prove my worth.

'Hi, Emily!' I trill. 'God, I might get my eyelashes dyed. Yours look amazing!'

'Do you think?' she says, smiling prettily.

'Oh yeah, they're great. You must not even need mascara or anything.' She looks momentarily suspicious at this incredibly prescient comment, but I steamroller on. 'Is that you?' Her mirror's peppered with pictures of a cute blonde toddler in retro clothes.

'Yeah, I was at my mum's at the weekend and she had them all out. Just thought it'd be nice, you know…'

How vain do you have to be to display pictures of your infant self around your place of work? Even if I wanted to I'd struggle as there's no way of knowing who's who in most of me and Alice's archive.

'They're really lovely!' I say, disgusted by my hypocrisy but gratified to spot Suzanne's smile of approval. 'Do you mind if I grab our esteemed producer for a minute?' Emily nods her assent and I lead Suzanne over the brow of the hill and out of Tarquin's sight. I

outline the problem to her, trying not to convey how much work is left to do on the costumes for the ball. Suzanne looks increasingly worried, shaking her head and treating herself to an extra big drag on her fag.

'I'm seriously worried. He can't shift the schedule on a whim like that, it's so undisciplined. And his rushes…'

The daily footage is what all the executive producers will be poring over. They took a risk employing Tarquin and they'll need to know they're getting sufficient bang for their buck.

'Are they disappointing?' I ask her leadingly. Suzanne looks at me appraisingly, weighing up whether to confide in me. The fact that she's known me since I was in short trousers wins out.

'It's hard to know before they're properly edited, but I'm not sure he understands what a TV audience want.'

Star Wars in crinolines surely?

'What are the execs thinking? Do they agree with you?'

'They're not here to see him on the floor and I don't want them thinking it's going badly unless it's strictly necessary. I've already had to lie through my teeth in order to explain away your genius stunt by the seaside. If I hit them with the potential sacking of a director after a massive insurance claim, there's no knowing what will happen.'

I look down, knowing there's no point spewing out more meaningless apologies. Will I ever come back from my disastrous mistake? Besides, her woes run way deeper than that. If she tries to point out Tarquin's inadequacies to the execs she'll be asking them

to admit they made a mistake hiring him. The far easier option will be blaming her for managing the shoot badly.

'He likes you, Lulu, despite that whole carry-on.'

'Oh, I don't know…' The last thing I want is her thinking my loyalties lie elsewhere. She's only letting me hang on in there because she thinks Zelda's coming back: if her leave of absence is going to spiral out of control, Suzanne's patronage will be critical.

'No, he's got a definite soft spot for you – that's why you're the first person he's told what he's planning. Can you keep tabs on him for me? Be my eyes and ears?'

'I don't know if I could –'

She cuts across me, hard-faced. 'I'm asking for your help here. You could say you owe me one under the circumstances.'

'You're asking me to spy –'

'No, I'm not,' she snaps. 'I'm sharing my worries and asking you to help. I need to know what he's up to. This budget's tight enough without him springing any more surprises on me.'

Suddenly I see a way this could work for me, even if it does require me to sell my soul.

'And therein lies the problem. It's taking all my time just to find ways round it. I don't know where I'd find space to work on Tarquin.'

I pause meaningfully, knowing Suzanne's canny enough to pick up the implication. There's a short Mexican standoff before she offers me an extra £3k. Thank God for that: Charles would've been in Bermuda shorts by episode six without this emergency top-up. And

it's not just me I'm batting for – I can't bear for Zelda's reputation to suffer. Still, I know full well that Suzanne will be expecting her pound of flesh in return. I hope I'm not going to live to regret this.

She puffs off to speak to the other heads of department, who are all going ape shit about Tarquin's schedule change. Luckily the weather displays a minimal improvement, so we revert to the original plan – Charles taking his uptight intended for a romantic walk while pining for Emily. I haven't seen him since the mysterious Polish 'sorry' and my nerves are off the scale. Will he be blandly friendly or quietly brooding? If he knew how much pointless mental energy I spent anticipating our meetings, I'd be so ashamed.

I endure the anxiety for fifteen minutes or so and then feel suddenly angered by my own pathos. Why do I spend my entire life flumping around, waiting for idiot men to set the emotional agenda? I'm going to head for his trailer and try on my power-bitch knickers for size: it's a way better policy than waiting for an unpredictable and public meeting on-set. I stride over and rap on the door.

'Hang on a sec,' he calls. There's a pause and then he pulls the door open. 'Sorry, I was on the phone,' he says, then takes in it's me. 'Lulu!' he says, a wide grin splitting his face in two. 'Er, I mean, Lulu,' now self-consciously muted, 'come in.'

And that's it, all I need to know contained in a single greeting. I'm instantly gratified, then horribly aware how inappropriate it is for me to be in his trailer when all I want to do is kiss him.

'Um, tea? Coffee?' he says, flustered. 'Drambuie?'

'I only drink absinthe before lunch.'

‘An excellent choice.’

I perch on a chair, suddenly revisited by that feeling of intimacy, of knowing, that engulfed me in the pub. Being in an unfamiliar environment has brought it flooding back, even though all the complicating factors still exist. He hands me a cup of tea, leaning down to give it to me and looking at me with his full attention.

‘What’s been happening to you, Lulu? I’ve hardly seen you.’

‘Oh, you know, not much. Sewing, mending, other forms of domestic servitude.’

He laughs, holding my gaze. ‘I mean what’s really been happening with you? Lulu the Brave, not Lulu the one-woman pincushion.’

I look back at him, weighing up whether to be flippant or honest.

‘Um, I’ve just been trying to get on with it. Get over it. Oh God, get over what? Sorry, I sound like a loony.’

‘No, you don’t,’ he says softly, as there’s a sharp rap on the door. I find myself jumping up like a scalded cat, stowing myself behind the door. The first assistant director mercifully stays outside, shouting through that Charles is needed immediately. I straighten up, feeling like even more of a mentalist.

‘You can come out now,’ he says, casting me an affectionate grin. ‘Look, we’ve clearly got to talk about this. Can I prevail on you to drive me home if I promise not to drag you in by your hair?’

What’s he asking for here? Surely what we said in the pub covered all bases? We’re desperately attracted, but we can’t be together. I know I should walk away, but somehow my power knickers have lost their elastic. Instead I promise to meet him on

wrap and leave his winnebago high as a kite. But every gust of anticipation is followed by a cloud of doom as I remember how hopeless it all is. Maybe, just maybe, it's all right for me to play make believe for one single day. I can do penance tomorrow after the inevitable crash.

Luckily I've got too much to do to obsess (although I make a pretty good attempt). I've got £3k to play with and I need to work out how to get the most out of it before Suzanne tries to snatch it back. I go and grab Gareth, pinning him down in the wardrobe caravan for a brainstorming session.

'Why's the old trout relented anyway?' he asks. 'She's known we've been up shit creek for weeks. Could it be she's finally got over trouser-gate?'

'Yeah, I think she has,' I say, knowing full well Suzanne's holding it over me like an axe. Figuring it's safer for Gareth that he's not implicated in the counter-surveillance, I get back to the job in hand. 'But what we need to decide is how to squeeze the most value add out of it.'

I pause for a second, wondering if I should just call Zelda, but something stops me.

'Well, the money shot is the ball,' says Gareth, somehow managing to wheel the conversation back round to sperm.

'I know, but if we blow it all there we'll have bugger all for Lady Victoria's funeral. Not to mention the fact that we've got two weddings to prep.'

Sir Percy eventually cleaves to his parents' wishes, entering into a loveless union with Lady Victoria, but when she conveniently dies in childbirth three episodes later, he elopes with Bertha and hangs the consequences. 'Last Carriage' is nothing if not predictable.

'Yes, darling,' continues Gareth, 'but if they've eloped she could be wearing virtually a pinny.' I look at him, my expression conveying what histrionics we'd have to endure if Emily's big moment took place in a mob cap. 'I see your point,' he concedes.

The two of us spend the rest of the afternoon sketching, working out how to pull off two weddings on a budget like we're on a low-rent reality show. Gareth suggests he goes back down to London to get properly stuck into Lady Victoria's dress, but I can't bear to sanction it.

'Lulu, you'd be fine. It's all under control up here.'

He's probably right: we're the most senior members of the team and it makes sense to spread our resources. But I feel like I'm swimming with sharks as it is, let alone if I cut my Guy Friday adrift. He's exasperated, but I can see he's touched, and he suggests we continue our planning into the evening over a pub dinner.

'Um, I can't,' I say awkwardly, groping for a reasonable explanation.

'Oh, I see,' says Gareth, raising an eyebrow. 'Anything you want to share? Sparks with the sparks? Hide the sausage with the caterers?'

'*No*,' I say emphatically. 'I just want an early night.'

‘You’ve got to eat!’ says Gareth reasonably. Jesus, I must seem so antisocial.

‘I know, but I wanna talk to Alice and I’ve got to wash my hair.’

How lame an excuse is that? Gareth puts a hand up. ‘Fine,’ he says, ‘you must do what you need to do.’ I don’t blame him for being spiky with me; I’d feel the same in reverse. I really need to work on my alibi skills. Or rather I DON’T, as this ridiculous situation is obviously going to stop after this evening. I promise myself I’ll make it up to Gareth as soon as I’m out of the wanton woods, and turn my attention to my no make-up make-up look.

The weather takes a turn for the worse over the course of the afternoon and, although we just about stick to the schedule, we drop a couple of shots and wrap early. I faff around in the caravan till Gareth’s gone, then text Charles to tell him the coast is clear. He appears in an instant, tugging away at the mutton chop sideburns that the hair team have plastered to his face.

‘I ran out on Kerry when she was in the middle of ungluing them. She must think I’ve got some weird facial hair fetish,’ he says, twinkling at me.

‘That’s nothing!’ I counter, telling him all about the lame excuse I fed Gareth. Oh God, we’re talking like lovers when almost nothing’s occurred. Maybe we’re just picking up the nineteenth-century vibe and making it our own.

‘Are you sure you want me to drive you home?’ I ask him. ‘I’m pretty shit on a straight road in blazing sunshine, let alone in this.’ I gesture to the window, which is being repeatedly bashed by

branches as the wind works its way up into something close to a hurricane.

'We'll survive, Lulu, I'm convinced of it,' he says, holding the door of the caravan open for me chivalrously.

'Don't say I didn't warn you.'

We fight our way to the car and set off into the blustery night. It appears tough but do-able until we discover that all lanes look the same in the dark. I can just about work out the route to my cottage, because I drove myself here this morning, but Charles is stumped as to where his is as he was transported half asleep. The production office has provided local maps, but I've stupidly left mine on the kitchen table so we decide to take a detour via the cottage. I park up, suddenly self-conscious, hoping I haven't left any underwear scattered around the place. Considering this relationship started with me handing him my knickers, it's the last thing I need.

I push open the door and he follows me in, his large frame seeming to fill the doll's-house proportions of the dinky kitchen. The Aga's giving off a comforting warmth and there's a bottle of wine on the side. We take in the howling gale, then look at each other a little too long.

'One for the road?' he says, and I feel my insides turn to mulch as I smile an assent. I uncork the bottle, turning away so he can't see me blushing. We've agreed it can't go any further and I know it mustn't. I've got to remain dignified and accepting, not love-struck and needy.

I pass him a glass and we retire to the sofa, chinking cheers. Then there's a loaded pause which gradually starts to feel unbearable. I don't want him to think I'm sitting here pathetically waiting for a miracle so I jump right into it.

'How are you finding your costumes?' I gabble. 'Is there anything you'd particularly like me to change, other than obviously not leaving you naked in front of the whole crew again. I mean –'

'Lulu,' he says, putting his hand on my arm. 'You don't need to do this. It's me who needs to be apologizing to you.'

Here we go: the world's most drawn-out dumping. Why did I agree to this?

'It would've been completely irresponsible of me to kiss you under any circumstances, but particularly when I knew how I felt about you.'

'What do you mean?' I ask him, feeling my voice quavering.

'Knowing it would never just be a snog. Knowing that the minute it happened all the feelings I had for you would get totally out of hand. I should've just kept it to myself.'

'I'm glad you didn't,' I tell him, struck yet again by how impossible I find it to be anything but honest with him.

'Darling, I'm so happy you say that, but now look where we are.'

'Where are we?' I say, before he silences me with a kiss. I get lost in it, consumed and swept up by the passion of it all. He pushes me backwards, rolls more on top of me, then pulls away.

'Oh God, I'm so sorry,' he says. 'I'm like a schoolboy when I'm around you. I'm meant to be talking to you, not trying to rip your

clothes off. That's why I've been trying so desperately hard to keep myself to myself.'

'I thought you'd gone off me,' I mutter. He gives a wry smile.

'I'm afraid that's a medical impossibility.'

'I'm glad,' I say, wanting so much to pull him back down towards me. I wish, I wish… Christ, what's happened to me? What kind of bitch lies beneath the father of someone else's children, feeling gratified by their erection?

'Let me rearrange myself,' he says, straightening his humped-up jeans, 'and then let me try and explain to you why I'm seemingly behaving like such a grade-one shit.'

I try to pull myself together, sitting back up and retreating to my end of the sofa. He grabs my hand, looks at me imploringly.

'I don't even know if you want to hear this, but I feel like I should try and provide some context.' I nod, unable to speak. 'Bea taught me at drama school – she's a few years older than me – and I don't know what it was she thought she saw in me, but she seemed to instantly decide that we were destined. She was incredibly striking and impressive, and I just got carried along by it for a while.' He pauses, cocking his head. 'I must sound like a total girl when I describe it.' He laughs. 'No offence.'

'None taken,' I counter.

'So, anyway, we're a year or so in and suddenly she's pregnant. And I've been having doubts, feeling like it's more that I admire her than I'm in love with her, but the last thing I want to do is pressure her into an abortion and I can't just up and leave. And then Maxie

turns up and, though it was chaos at first, being a dad made sense of a lot of things that seemed pointless before.'

'What do you mean?' I ask.

'I suppose that once you have children, they become the point. They have to really, if you're going to be any kind of parent.'

And a selfish part of me thinks that whatever happens between us, they'll always come first: they have to. There'll always be someone who needs him more than me. *This isn't about you*, I tell myself sternly, and focus on what he's telling me.

'So I suppose we got swept along by having a common purpose and because I was away so much working we could ignore the fact that we didn't have much to say to each other. And we didn't want Max to be on his own, so then Theo came along and there we are, a fully-formed family.'

He looks at me, pain writ large, trying to gauge my reaction. I'm struggling to contain it all, totally unsure what the rules are. All I know is that my feelings for him are so strong that his unhappiness twists up inside me like a rag. Part of me wants the conclusion to be that he can't live a lie, but I can't bear to be the agent of his family's destruction. He carries on.

'I mean, the wedding said it all. I knew Bea wanted it, and it seemed ridiculous to have two children together and not be married. She just arranged the whole thing, I had three days off from "Casualty", slipped into my husband role, went straight back. On the day it felt like I was a guest, like I was watching myself get

married from the sidelines.' He gives a sad smile. 'It was probably the greatest performance of my career.'

'Oh no,' I say, trying to break the almost unbearable intensity, 'I'm not having that. Your Sir Percy is a towering performance.'

'It's all down to the director, darling. And, anyway, you clearly haven't seen my classic Sugar Puffs advertisement from 2003. The way I hold the spoon over the bowl, just hovering…'

We're laughing, then kissing, then pulling away.

'Oh Christ, Lulu, I'm such a fool. I should never have married someone I didn't feel like this about, whatever the circumstances.'

'But if you're this unhappy…' I trail off, unable to bear the sound of myself asking why he hasn't left. Who is this heartless home-wrecker I've metamorphosed into?

'Because I can't bear what it would do to the children and I can't bear not waking up in the same house as them.'

'Couldn't you go for joint custody? Live nearby and see them every week?'

'It's more complicated than that. Maxie…' He's struggling to speak.

'Darling?' I say gently. He continues.

'He's been diagnosed as being gifted, which turns out to be something of a poisoned chalice. He's completely brilliant at maths, but he struggles so much with social situations and I'm one of the few constants in his life. The world feels like such a big, scary place to him. Perhaps that's why he finds something with rules and parameters so rewarding. If I just upped and left…'

He looks away and I encircle his wrist, squeezing it. ‘That’s really hard,’ I say, stroking the hairs on the back of his arm. My heart’s going out to him, while simultaneously a tiny part of me wonders if this is the first time he’s been in a situation like this. I hate myself for thinking it, but how can I not?

‘And it’s not just the kids,’ he continues. ‘Bea’s given up so much to do this properly. She’s such a wife, you know?’ I try to look like I get it, though I’m not sure I do entirely. ‘Kids and a husband and a white picket fence were all she ever wanted. I’m not sure I can bear taking it away from her, not at this stage.’

An image of her looking like the Wicked Witch of the West, all long, straggly hair and yellowed teeth, flits across my mind. How old is she? My Internet stalking has established he’s almost forty so I’m guessing she’s forty-three or so.

‘Christ, this is so wrong of me,’ he says, ‘off-loading like this. You don’t need to get dragged into my car crash of a life.’ He swivels away, shoulders shaking, and I move across the sofa instinctively to hug him from behind.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I say, stroking his hair. My compassion feels whole-hearted now, no room left for niggling doubts about his sincerity. We stay like that for a while before he twists back round and pushes me down, kissing me deeply.

‘I don’t think you’ve got any idea how amazing you are… Jesus, Lulu, why does our timing have to be so terrible?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say. Tears spring to my eyes with the hopelessness of it all. We lie, entwined, communicating via the

warmth of our bodies and the strength of our heartbeats. Despite the layers of clothing it almost feels like we're one person.

'I should go,' he says eventually. 'Stop boring you to tears and let you get on with your evening.' Then we start kissing again, gradually becoming more impassioned.

'You really should go,' I tell him and then return to the job in hand. I reach for my wine glass, suddenly aware that there's now a mere thimbleful in the bottom of the bottle. 'Bollocks, there's no way I can drive you anywhere, even if we could navigate.'

'Disaster!' he says, grinning naughtily. 'I'm joking, Lulu. I won't take advantage of your weakened defences, but I will avail myself of your excellent sofa if that's OK. I don't think these country types go in for cabs.'

'Of course,' I say, as he pushes me down again, rolling over on top of me, legs at a right angle.

'What I wouldn't do for a flat surface,' he says.

'Oh no,' I say, 'not a chance,' but find myself submitting when he drags me down on to the floor.

To my great chagrin, I think it's me who starts the process of tunnelling under clothes, undoing a couple of his shirt buttons and touching his chest. He slips a hand inside my sweater, but it goes no further. Instead we carry on with the virginal teenage frotting, muttering things to one another at intervals. When his phone rings it's a horrible shock, not least because I've got no signal so assumed we were safe. 'Hang on,' he says, going into the bathroom to answer it. I pull my jumper down, cold and exposed, a dull ache spreading

through me as I crash land. I can hear the modulation of his voice, but not the words. Ten minutes later he comes back in and perches on the sofa awkwardly.

'Sorry about that,' he says sheepishly.

'Don't worry,' I say in a small voice, lost without a rule book yet again.

'Oh God, how weird is this?' he says. 'This just feels so utterly normal, in the most lovely way, like we've started some incredible relationship that's meant to be, and then I keep remembering what a nightmare it all is. That I'm breaking off from kissing you to say goodnight to my children.'

'We can't carry on,' I tell him, determined to be the one to say it. If it's me being strong then perhaps I can stand it.

'I know, I know. But perhaps we could have a little bit more of each other before we have to harden ourselves?'

'What, like a holiday romance?' I ask.

'Yes, a special offer. For one week only… Oh bugger, that's probably a terrible idea. One evening with you is catastrophic enough for my mental well-being.'

He grabs me again, rolling me back down on to the rug. As he's kissing me, his hands slip up into my bra. I think about stopping him, insisting we halt operations at first base, but I've lost the will. Logic seems fuzzy and indistinct now; there's just him and me and the crush of our bodies. We continue to kiss for ages until it starts to get cold and the floor gets unbearably hard. I don't know who suggests moving to the bed, but they should be court-martialled and

shot. Once we've reached it, we're on an unstoppable trajectory. His hand slips under my skirt, then peels it off. I lie there in my underwear, self-conscious, knowing I should resist. He looks at me searchingly, tracking my body with his eyes.

'You are utterly beguiling, do you know that?'

And with that, I'm lost. His clothes come off too and then he's on top of me, both of us now naked. I hate the expression, but when he slips inside me it feels like making love in the purest sense. How can this possibly be wrong? We're kissing throughout, murmuring intimacies to one another. It's the best sex of my life, despite the fact that it's far from perfect technically (if you get my drift). The intensity of it, the feeling behind it: this is surely how it's meant to be (ideally minus one of the participants being married). We lie there afterwards telling each other how amazing it was and how much we both wish things were different. I don't say it, but there's no way I can deny to myself that I'm falling in love with him.

'How can you possibly be single?' he asks. 'How come you haven't got every red-blooded man within the radius of the M25 howling at your door?'

I think momentarily of Ali, whose howl has been well and truly hushed by my stupid behaviour.

'Sometimes there's a dull bark, but I don't think you've got any idea how hard it is to find someone you really want to be with.'

'What about your twin, is she with anyone? I can't believe there's another person out there as gorgeous as you to contend with.'

I start out just telling him about vile Richard, but the fact that he's so easy to talk to means it expands into a snapshot of the whole of my life. I describe the dodgy family dinner; how when we lost our mum we somehow seemed to lose our dad too.

'Poor baby,' he says, stroking my hair. 'That must've been so hard for you when you were still so young.'

I'm choked up, so relieved to be heard and acknowledged after Alice's recent refusal to listen. It seems like, in this bed on this night, there is nothing I could say that would be unacceptable: it feels almost womb-like in its safety. Just for now I'm going to pretend that the morning doesn't exist.

Unfortunately, much like Cher, I'm unable to turn back time. We must've drifted off to sleep around three thirty a.m. and now, after a generous two hours' sleep, it's time to get ready for work. I look down at a comatose Charles. My mouth feels fungal and my head's throbbing, but my most overriding symptom is visceral, corrosive guilt. How could I have done that? What terrible karma will be visited on me if I'm ever lucky enough to marry someone myself?

'Hi,' he says sleepily, pulling me down towards him. I subtly turn my face away, the fungal factor and the self-hatred playing an equal part. 'Oh, sweetheart, are you feeling awful?' he says, and I feel the melting sensation beginning.

'Look, it happened,' I say, looking down at him. 'It's bad, but it's happened. Right now we just have to concentrate on getting into work without anyone busting us.'

‘OK,’ he says, squeezing my hand and jumping out of bed. He lopes towards the bathroom naked, arse perfect, shoulders broad. Oh God, I want him so badly. I wish that the straight and narrow was more appealing than this. I go downstairs to brew some coffee, trying my hardest to get a grip on the internal turmoil.

‘What do you want to do, Lulu?’ he says once we’re in the car. ‘I know we probably have to stop, but the idea that this is the end is almost unbearable to me.’

I’ve already warned him about my driving: he should know better. A good song on the radio’s enough to make me miss a turning, let alone a decision that will throw my whole life upside down. I don’t know what to wish for. I want him more than anything, but I know that the human cost is too high. But, then, perhaps it would be better for his kids to escape living in an atmosphere of silent resentment? Have a happy dad who’s not there every day, rather than a miserable shell of a man? I viciously chastise myself for straying down this particular path; it’s not for me to judge what’s best for anyone and there’s no way I can fool myself it’s born out of anything but self-interest. But I can’t walk away just yet. Soon, just not yet.

‘If we actually did treat it like a holiday romance, time-limited to when we go back down South…’ I say. Perhaps it’s all about self-discipline. I’ll award myself a brief period in which my heart can run amok like a hyperactive toddler, then banish it to the naughty step when time’s up.

‘Oh God, yes,’ he says. ‘If I can’t be with you, I’ve at least got to be allowed to make love to you again. As many times as is humanly possible before we’re thrown back into the wilderness.’

‘It’s a six-day reprieve,’ I tell him. ‘I’d suggest shaking on it, but I think I’d crash.’

He puts his hand on my thigh and rests it there till we’re nearly at the unit base. Then I tell him he’s got to lie down on the back seat so I can secretly drop him off in the car park. Surely I can handle it now we’ve got a plan?

I get to the wardrobe caravan to find Gareth harrumphing around, clearly still peeved about me blanking him last night.

‘You’re late. Did you suffer some near-death electrocution disaster while drying your hair?’

‘No…’ I say, laughing, hoping I can jolly him out of his bait.

‘Well, you clearly didn’t speak to Alice, as she was reduced to ringing me.’

‘Erm, no,’ I say, flustered, ‘my signal was completely non-existent so –’

‘She’s desperate to speak to you, wouldn’t tell me why. I suggest you carve some time out of your busy schedule to get back to her. Meanwhile, I’ve made an executive decision to go back to London.’

‘Gareth, don’t do that! I need you here, I really do.’

‘You think you do, but you don’t. You need me to get this wedding dress cut and stitched for Lady Victoria. The design’s lovely, Lulu, but that’s all it is.’

I can feel myself going into full panic mode at the idea of dealing with the whole operation sans Gareth. He's so brilliant at chivvying the team, making sure they're pulling their weight. I plead and beg, even attempt to pull rank, but he's not for turning.

'Needs must. Besides, I want to go round to Zelda's and flush out what's going on. We can't keep this facade in play indefinitely.'

My heart sinks a little further. Zelda's silence is starting to feel ominous, but, rather like when one's waiting for a call from a man who's never going to ring, it's possible to project only good things into the void. I'm determinedly telling myself that no news is good news, even though it's patently rubbish. Decision made, Gareth makes to leave.

'Buck up, it's not so bad. You look unfathomably exhausted for a girl who's had a quiet night in. And call that sister of yours. I'm off to admire Charles Adamson in his pants.'

I emit a strange 'heh heh heh' noise, which turns out to be my new patented version of a laugh, and unsuccessfully attempt to call Alice, who's clearly still dead to the world. I send her a vacuous text instead, telling her how lovely the cottage is, and resolve to call her later. Then I reluctantly head off in search of Tarquin, all set to kick off my charm offensive. Or should that be offensive charm, considering its misplaced motives?

He's eating an egg roll by the catering bus, yolk avalanching down his stubbly chin. 'Morning, Treacle,' he says, opening his mouth wide enough to reveal its half-masticated load.

‘Hi, Tarquin,’ I say, trying to keep the revulsion off my face. What did I ever like about this man? ‘How’s day two in the Dales?’

‘Fabulous!’ he replies, enthusiastically wiping his eggy paws on his denim knees. I swear he’s bipolar; his moods bounce from high to low like a demented space-hopper. ‘Obviously we dropped a scene yesterday, but it’s not like we needed it! I want to pare this story down, pick out the bare bones of the character journeys. Now I’ve Damien on hand, I think we can really move beyond the obvious, make the audience question everything they thought they wanted.’

Damien’s the new editor, another youngish pretender with pointy shoes and hair like a cockatoo. I’m not quite sure what happened to the middle-aged woman who was editing up till now, but I know that Tarquin threw a shit fit when Suzanne tried to follow her with another one of her old faithfuls.

‘Great,’ I say. ‘I’m glad you’ve got a friend.’

‘We all need friends, don’t we, Lulu?’ He’s smirking at me now, making me totally paranoid that he knows. ‘Anyway, he’s more than a friend, he’s a *collaborator*. Someone who understands where the ship’s headed. Talking of which, I’m heading to set. I’d like you close by today so we can keep tossing ideas for the ball around.’

Oh no, Charles is in virtually every scene today: set’s the last place I should be. I’m convinced there’s a gigantic sign floating above my head proclaiming ‘Jezebel’ in neon capital letters. But there’s no arguing with Tarquin, and at least I earn a sly smile of approval from Suzanne when she sees me arriving with him. I’m

teeth-grindingly nervous about Charles coming on-set and channel my anxiety into a hyperactive sales pitch for my look for the ball.

'I want the skirts to feel like inverted tulips, vivid and floral, so that Percy's dark suit can cut a swathe right through when he chases Bertha out of the ballroom.'

Tarquin is almost frothing at the mouth. 'This is what I want from you, Lulu: you taking your inspiration from me and doing exactly what I ask.'

Hang on, when did he impart any of this to me? I certainly don't remember Darth Vader deciding to throw off that woefully unflattering black helmet in favour of a pretty floral frock. 'Well, your passion's very inspiring,' I tell him, making him puff up with self-importance. I'm saved the need for any more meaningless flattery by the head of the camera team calling him over to discuss the first shot. Oh God, the first shot. Sir Percy standing at the dining-room table trying to admit to Lady Victoria that he could never love her. Positions decided, Charles and Felicity are called from their winnebagos. I give him a half smile then look away, hoping he understands that I'm here against my will. Right now I feel he understands everything about me, like he's got an 'access all areas' pass to my body and soul. He looks at me a little too long and I judder inside.

Poor Felicity. She's a much better actress than Emily, with a face that you immediately recognize but can't quite place. She works consistently, but doesn't have the kind of brash public profile that makes Emily bankable. As far as 'Last Carriage' goes, she's Emily's

stooge, there to look pained and noble before she conveniently croaks and leaves the path clear for the relationship that the audience has been rooting for. This scene, in which she's wetness personified, is a case in point. Tarquin shoots her close-up first.

'Percy, I long to be a worthy confidante, a trusted fellow traveller on the long journey that we shall be undertaking as husband and wife.'

'You shall be, my dear. You have many fine qualities.'

'But do you hold me in your bosom, think of me with passion as well as high regard?'

I'm watching through the monitor and as the camera is on Felicity I can only really see her performance. Take after endless take ensues, but when I attempt to slip away Tarquin glares at me so beadily that I think better of it. He's finally satisfied and there's a brief break while they reset the camera angles for Charles's turn in the spotlight. He disappears immediately and I assume he's retreated to his caravan, but instead find he's reappeared at my side with a steaming cup of coffee.

'Far too much milk, no sugar?' he says, leaving me thrilled he's remembered my preferences and terrified our intimacy is obvious to the assembled throng. Luckily everyone's too busy or too self-involved to pay any attention.

'Thank you very much,' I say stiffly, slurping a gulp nervously.

'It's very –'

Damn, it's about 106 degrees – I swear I've burnt the roof of my mouth clean off. God is so smiting me down for my moral

bankruptcy. I force myself to neck it nevertheless, as spitting coffee all over one's lover is far from advisable. Lover, lover, lover… I wish I had the strength to walk away. I will, of course, as soon as we're back on home turf. Charles is beyond solicitous, rushing off to get me a cooling glass of water and causing a minor panic in the process when he can't be found for his close-up. I'm too paranoid to admit I know exactly where he is and have to look away when Tarquin snarls at him.

'Can we get on with it?' he demands as an apologetic Charles hurries to find his mark. Here we go again, another hour of hearing the same clichéd exchange repeated countless times. Felicity starts up with her opening gambit. I drift off a bit then find myself focused on Charles. Is he as tired and emotional as me? How hard must it be to do something that requires such intense concentration after the night we had?

'You shall be, my dear,' he says again, looking grey with exhaustion. 'You have many fine qualities.'

'But do you hold me in your bosom, think of me with passion as well as high regard?'

'Cut!' shouts Tarquin. 'I want muscle from this, I want to know you're hurt. You're both too polite! Do it again.'

I feel immediately affronted on Charles's behalf. It's not like he's got the material at his disposal to build a towering performance. They go through the same dialogue again.

'… high regard?' says Felicity.

Charles waits a beat then comes back in with his line.

‘I believe our union will serve us both well, but –’

‘It will! It will!’ says Felicity. Lady Victoria has been in love with Sir Percy since childhood and longs to believe that their relationship will be all she’s hoped for.

‘And yet, if you demand total honesty from your betrothed…’

Lady Victoria is meant to pull back at this point, frightened of what she’s set in motion.

‘I know that you love me,’ continues Charles, ‘that your loyalty is unflinching…’ And I swear he looks straight at me in the long pause that follows, grasping the corner of the dining table.

‘I wish for us to know the truth of one another, for you to be cherished in the manner you deserve. Perhaps the cost is too high for us to carry deep-held secrets into our marriage. If true love eludes us, should we not consider that we might find it best elsewhere?’

He looks over again, his emotion ratcheting up a gear. His voice rises, his face creases up in visible agony. Tarquin stares intently, obviously aware of the power of his performance. And me, I start to well up.

‘Our conversation has satisfied me, Percy, and now I must return to my mother.’

‘But, Victoria –’

‘There is no more to be said on the matter. I shall see you at the ball.’

The scene’s over. Tarquin shouts ‘cut’ and I attempt to stifle my ridiculous overreaction. We’re making a Victorian potboiler, for

God's sake: I might as well be weeping over 'Home and Away'! That said, I know I need a moment alone. I rush off-set, ignoring Tarquin, and head for the caravan, praying it'll be empty. But God's on a roll now and has ensured that Gareth's in there having a noisy conversation with the costumiers. I'd like to turn tail, but the driving Yorkshire rain's started up again so I'm trapped. He hangs up and peers round.

'What's up *now*?' he asks, all superior.

'Nothing,' I say sullenly.

'Jesus, Lulu, are you having the longest period in human history? I've never known you this moody.'

'Oh, bugger off,' I say, suddenly furious with him for abandoning me. 'At least I'm not leaving you in the lurch and swanning off back to London.'

'I'm hardly swanning off. I'm taking a difficult managerial decision which, frankly, you should have the guts to make yourself.'

'Guts? Are you saying I'm a coward?'

'No, but I am saying that you need to grip up and start being the boss. I don't know what's got into you recently, and you've made it abundantly clear you don't trust me enough to confide.'

'Maybe I could start being the boss if you actually respected my decisions rather than blatantly defying me.'

'Defying you!' splutters Gareth. 'I'll see you in town, by which time I sincerely hope you'll have got over yourself.'

And with that he stalks off, leaving me shaking with rage. Why's he being so disloyal? I wish I could just disappear off in a two-man

love boat with Charles. I feel like he's the only person on the entire planet who understands me right now, but his approval could easily cost me my soul.

The afternoon's scenes are far more functional, so I'm saved from any more unwarranted emotion. Besides, however enraged I am, Gareth's insults have brought me up short: I'm determined not to cast myself in the role of love-struck loser. I glue myself to Tarquin's side, flattering and cajoling him into agreeing to all my plans for the weddings (mainly because I've convinced him they're his plans). Gareth gone, I call the rest of the team together and brief them, sending Briony off to Bradford to find fabric and putting Patrick, Gareth's super-keen lieutenant, in charge of Charles. He looks uncharacteristically hesitant.

'Is there a problem?' I ask him.

'I dunno, Lulu, I just…' He trails off.

'What?'

'I don't think he likes me much. I think he prefers you.'

I swallow a blush (the reason that sounds impossible is because it is).

'Patrick, you're great – why wouldn't he like you?'

'He's just a bit… aloof. It's fine, I just thought you'd wanna know in case you wanted to cover him.'

'Cover him? Cover him. No, no I don't. You'll be fine. He's a lovely guy when you get to know him. I-I think. That's what Gareth says anyway.'

See? Cool professionalism 24/7. It's my brand. I give my new laugh another try then hurriedly back out, running straight into Suzanne.

'My favourite crew member, just who I was hoping to find.'

'How can I help?'

'You seem to be getting on famously with a certain person.'

Oh no, does she have X-ray vision?

'Do I?'

'He's eating out of your hand.' Oh God, oh God. 'What's he been sharing? Any more surprises he's planning on springing?'

My relief means that I start to babble. 'Oh, he's fine, Suzanne, quite happy. Seems totally smitten with the new editor. Singing his praises.'

'I knew it!' snaps Suzanne, colour springing to her cheeks. 'He's some jumped-up wannabe who's inflated his CV. Tarquin vetoed everyone else and managed to persuade Jeremy to keep taking these stupid risks.'

Jeremy's the executive producer at the production company, a good ten years younger than Suzanne, and I'm sensing he's not a fan. She's a safe pair of hands, not a visionary, a fact that Tarquin's clearly manipulating in his favour.

'Have you seen a cut?' I ask her. There would normally be a rough version of episode one available by this stage of the shoot.

'Avril's version was in pretty good shape, but when she walked off and Damien came in, Tarquin insisted on more time. I've been asking every day but he's stalling me. I don't want him to show it to

Jeremy first and get him signed up to something totally bloody ill-conceived. That's the problem with having a bunch of toddlers in charge of the television industry… it takes experience.' She pauses. 'Sorry, Lulu, but you know what I mean.'

I give her a stiff smile. 'Well, look, I'll keep talking to him, see what I can establish.'

'I'm not sure that's enough,' says Suzanne, a steely glint in her eye. 'I think we may need to move the campaign on to Stage Two.'

'Stage Two?'

'I need you to find out if there's a cut and try to get a look at it.'

'I can't see how –'

'We're off on location, long winter evenings. Take him for a drink, pump him for information.'

'That's not really my style, Suzanne,' I say pleadingly.

'For God's sake, I'm not asking you to transform yourself into Mata Hari. My reputation's on the line here. If I deliver some total turkey to the TV company, we'll all be damned. Forewarned is forearmed.'

'But if you want me to actually see it… There's no way I'm going back with him.'

'Don't be so ridiculous, Lulu. I'm not suggesting you prostitute yourself. He might just hand it over: God knows he likes a chance to share his enormous talent.'

It's not his enormous talent I'm worried about. First the pickled eggs, now this. Could I really be emitting some high-pitched sound, audible only to TV types: '*I am a harlot with no scruples, I am a harlot*

with no scruples.' I'm as non-committal as I can be with Suzanne, then retreat to the caravan to contemplate my all-round moral bankruptcy. It's quiet and empty, Gareth's bag and laptop gone. I know what I'm doing is wrong, what I would say to Alice if she were in this situation, and yet my pull to Charles is so strong that I can't slam on the brakes. The sense of aloneness feels like a boulder in the pit of my stomach. I need to call Alice anyway; perhaps I should just tell her everything and hope that she understands? I'm weighing it up, all too aware how appalled she'll be, only to be saved by the shrill shriek of my phone: Charles.

'Hi, darling,' he says, all warm and affectionate.

'Hi,' I squeak.

'Where can I find you, gorgeous girl? We've wrapped.'

And within an hour I'm back on the train, or at least back in my Peugeot, having waited the requisite amount of time to set off for his cottage (the last thing I need is his driver spotting me tootling up the path).

'Well, hello,' he says when I arrive, thrusting a glass of wine into my hand. As soon as I've taken a sip he grabs it off me, dumping it on the hall table so that he can push me against the wall and kiss me ferociously. I've never had this kind of chemistry with anyone before. It's like there's no stopping us; we rip each other's clothes off and do it right there and then on the hall carpet. It's only afterwards, as the adrenaline wears off and the cold kicks in, that the hopelessness of it starts to creep back. Feeling me shiver, Charles uncurls himself from me and hands me my jumper.

‘Sorry, sweetheart, I don’t know what came over me. You just have this effect on me.’

I reach for my discarded knickers, feeling self-conscious and slutty. Charles looks at me, stroking my bare arm.

‘I’m so, so sorry it’s like this. It shouldn’t be, Lulu, it really shouldn’t. We should be a proper couple, having walks and weekends away and meeting each other’s parents.’

I suddenly get a mental picture of Dad looking Charles up and down while Julia tries to find an excuse to inspect his stools. Much as I’d love to have a normal relationship with him, I think I could live without that. I smile at him.

‘That’s why we can’t do this for any length of time. We’ve got to be strict about it being a holiday romance or else we’re in no end of trouble.’

He looks stricken, turns away.

‘Charles…’

‘I need to talk to you about all that, but let me make you some supper first. I got Gary to stop off at the Co-op, so who knows what culinary masterpiece I might conjure up?’

The selection of food is quite bizarre. There’s own-brand Cava, Wensleydale with cranberries and steamed treacle pudding in a can. I inspect them all, laughing.

‘Talk me through it.’

‘Believe it or not, they were the most glamorous foodstuffs I could lay my hands on. But you’re right, they don’t add up to much of a meal.’

Luckily the production team have left him some basics and I make a tomatoey olivey sauce that we pour over penne. The Cava has to be drunk out of water glasses, but overall the effect isn't too bad. Tomorrow's a night shoot, which means that the call time is not until two, even later for Charles, so there's a glorious sense that school's out. We talk non-stop over supper, laughing about the ghastliness of Tarquin and Emily and swapping stories about growing up in London. I think about telling him what Suzanne's asked me to do, but I'm worried he'll think I'm mercenary and manipulative. In some senses it's no different from the beginning of any relationship, that titanic struggle to display only your most sterling qualities until you sense you're loved enough to reveal the spots of mould.

As I reach over the table to top up our glasses, he grabs my hand.

'You've got no idea what a relief this is. I feel like I've stumbled across an oasis in the desert.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'd just forgotten.'

'Forgotten what?'

'What it feels like to sit opposite an incredible woman and drink up her company. Me and Bea, there's just these long silences. We barely look at each other some days. It's so bloody functional.'

I smile sympathetically, not knowing what to say. 'Choose me' springs to mind, but for all the reasons previously stated I've vowed not to stray any further down the path of Satanic selfishness.

‘I’m glad,’ I say. ‘Not that it’s so grim, but that you’re having a lovely time with me.’

‘I am, Lulu, I really am. I’m suddenly aware how numb I’ve been, stamping down how lonely it is.’

I’m flooded with compassion: loneliness is my most hated feeling in the whole wide world. How strange it is that I’ve been salving his isolation while he’s been engendering it for me. But not now, not when I’m with him – when we’re together I feel a sense of utter connection. I must, must, must call Alice. But how can I, knowing the level of dishonesty that’s required?

Supper over, Charles insists on clearing everything up. I’m perched on the sideboard by the sink, ripe to be plucked by his wet, soapy hands. He grabs me around the waist and pulls me to him, kissing my face and neck. It takes me back to our last encounter and I momentarily pull away.

‘Wasn’t there something you wanted to say to me…’

He pauses, looks at me, then returns to the kissing.

‘Later, Lulu. I’m afraid I’ve got a one-track mind.’

‘Hang on,’ I say, going outside to grab my bag which I discarded in the hall in the flurry of passion. Anxiety about Alice has been nagging away at me throughout the evening. Bugger, I’ve got a missed call from eight o’clock. It’s eleven thirty now and I don’t want to risk waking her up. Convincing myself it’s consideration not cowardice that’s stopping me, I throw myself back into Charles’s soapy embrace and allow him to lead me upstairs. His bedroom’s large and comfortable, very different from the low-beamed cosiness

of my cottage. He throws me down and lands on top of me, pinning my arms back. It's sexy sex, intense and visceral, but there's a bit of me that can't let go. Is it guilt or self-preservation? I'm not sure.

That said, I sleep the sleep of the just: nine whole hours, do not pass go. I wake up at ten to the sound of him making coffee, my mood sliding from pleasure to pain within ten seconds of full consciousness. Being with him is like being given a huge, shiny Christmas present and then finding there's nothing inside. Or worse, a Barbie cooker with no batteries in the mid-eighties when 24-hour shops didn't exist – Alice and I cried till Boxing Day over that particular Grecian tragedy. Alice: I'm going to call her right now. We've never been out of contact for this long; it's total and utter madness. I rootle round in my bag, which I brought upstairs with me. The signal's absolutely terrible, but standing on a stool in the corner of the room elicits a single bar. It flashes up I've got two messages, but knowing they're most probably from her I ignore them and make the call. I can't bear to hear her justified hurt; I'd rather steamroll her with apologies and explanations. When she picks up, I can barely hear her.

'Alice? Sorry, the line's terrible.'

'I know, there's loads of tunnels.'

'Tunnels? There aren't any tunnels, just hills. Listen, I'm so sorry I've been so crap…'

My voice starts to crack with the relief of hearing hers. How could I let a man alienate me from my beloved sister?

'Don't worry, sis, forget it. I'm only an hour away now.'

‘You’re what?’

‘Gareth said you were off today? I’ve left you loads of messages. I’ve just…’ And with that she gives way to sobbing. Charles has appeared in the doorway, signalling frantically that I should get off the phone, but I bat him away. He doesn’t get to take priority over my sister.

‘Alice? What do you mean? What’s happened?’

‘Haven’t you listened to anything? Richard dumped me, he dumped me, Lulu! I couldn’t stand rattling around for the whole of half term feeling like the world’s biggest loser. I can cook and read when you’re at work and we can cosy up in the evenings.’

Charles is getting increasingly agitated and I turn away, irritated by him for the first time.

‘Of course,’ I say, high-pitched and panicky. ‘But where are you?’

‘I don’t know, not far. Where are we?’ she asks someone in the background. ‘Lulu, you won’t believe who I’ve –’

And with that she disappears, swallowed up by a tunnel.

‘Lulu, you’ve got to get going,’ says Charles, jittery with stress.

‘Too right I have,’ I tell him. ‘My sister’s about an hour away, I think…’

Charles looks positively grey. ‘It’s more complicated than that.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m afraid it’s not just your sister. Bea and the kids are on their way too.’

‘What?!’ I’m too horrified to move, even though I know that donning my knickers should be the priority.

‘She vaguely threatened to come on Monday, but I didn’t think she’d bother. I was trying to tell you last night.’

‘Trying? Trying?! You could have tried a lot harder than that.’

He reaches towards me ineffectually.

‘I know, I know I should’ve. But I wasn’t sure it would come to pass. And last night was so bloody gorgeous, so relaxed and intimate. I couldn’t bear to break the spell, Lulu. You were there too, angel: you must understand.’

And I sort of do. I can’t help but be grateful for the bubble of perfection we experienced even if the fall is as hard as this. That said, I’m still furious with him.

‘I can’t believe you didn’t warn me! How do you think I feel, scrabbling around for my knickers when your wife’s on the doorstep?’

‘You’re right, of course you’re right. I’m just so bloody addicted to you that all logic goes out of the window.’

He’s giving me a look of such pleading affection that I find myself reaching my arms around him, pressing myself against his chest for a brief moment. Is this the last time I’ll feel him against me? Then I race round the room, gathering my things together and giving my teeth a brief brush.

‘I really think they might be on the train together,’ I shout from the bathroom.

‘I can’t bear chasing you out, but I think there’s less than an hour,’ he shouts back. ‘She texted saying they’d reached York.’

Terrified, I tear through the house looking for any traces of my presence, but Charles has already undertaken a Mafioso-like clean-up operation. I realize what a stupid game I've been playing with myself, pretending that Bea's some kind of hologram that doesn't exist in three dimensions. Disgustingly selfish though it is, I can't bear the idea that these living, breathing individuals who have so much more claim over him than I do will be making this house their own in less than an hour. Less than an hour? I've got to get out. He grips me on the doorstep.

'We'll talk about this at work.'

'Oh God, Charles, what is there to talk about?' I'm so angry with myself, so angry with him. 'We made the rules, we've got to stick to them.'

'Lulu…'

I force myself to keep walking, even though part of me wants to prostrate myself, tell him I love him, beg him to be with me. I'm starting to hate myself for what I could become. I get in the car and hurtle down the country road far too fast. I let myself back into my cottage, taking in the debris of Tuesday morning: two coffee cups, two plates of half-eaten toast. I've just about got them cleared away when a cab pulls up. Alice is in the front, and Charles's entire family is squashed in the back. I hover on the doorstep, stricken. Alice jumps out, leaning into the back seat to kiss Bea. I look away, unable to process the horror of it all. The cab pulls off and Alice runs over to me, throwing herself into my arms. Suddenly it's all

that matters: my sister needs me and that's what counts. It's a rare thing for Alice to lean on me; it's normally the other way round.

'Hey,' I say, rubbing her back. 'Come and have a cup of tea. He is SUCH a dick.'

'Him and the rest of mankind,' she says, through a mix of a sob and a laugh.

I smile back, trying to believe it's gospel. If I can take on board the overwhelming evidence and convict Charles as charged, I might have a hope of getting my life back on track. But something tells me it's not going to be that simple.

Chapter Thirteen

I get Alice installed by the Aga with a strong cup of tea and a HobNob, by which time she's calm enough to tell me what's gone down back in London. She looks so hunched up and shivery: it's such a relief to love someone without the need to exterminate the feeling as soon as it pokes its head over the parapet.

'So you set off on Sunday, and I asked him if he just wanted to spend the week at ours. You know, I hate it when you're away, so I thought I'd try and make the best of it. And it's half term and everything so I thought we'd be able to have breakfast together, and morning sex and –'

I jump in before I'm overwhelmed by an image of a naked, tumescent Richard.

'I get the picture. What did he say?'

'He insisted I had to go and stay with him in that poky little flat over the off-licence. So I said it didn't make any sense when we've got a whole house, but he said that it was easier for him with work and that he sleeps better in his own bed.'

'We're only five minutes away from his stupid shop.'

What's happened to her? Alice is no shrinking violet, but he's somehow managed to rob her of all her chutzpah.

‘I know, I know. But I just couldn’t be bothered having the fight. So I went round there on Monday night with a big bag, and he starts clucking.’

‘Clucking?’

‘Yes, literally clucking. He was going on about how I’m nesting, like I’m trying to move in by stealth or something. So I got a bit arsy and said that I loved living with you so he had nothing to worry about. And then he sort of implied it was a bit freaky that we were living together at thirty-two, which really pissed me off. And then he said he didn’t think you liked him.’

‘Oh God, I’m sorry.’

She bats me away.

‘No, it’s not your fault. I said you thought he was great, and then he went downstairs to sell White Lightning to tramps –’

‘He doesn’t really sell White Lightning does he?’

‘No,’ says Alice, giggling for the first time. ‘I’d love to see him giving it the hard sell though. “*Wonderful floral top notes, crisp, even finish.*” Then he spent ages after closing lugging bottles around the cellar, like he didn’t want to see me. And I’d put on a really sexy nightie to try and perk things up, but by the time he got upstairs I’d fallen asleep. Saturday was so late and horrible…’ She casts me a look, telling me how much she’s brooded about our cross words. I smile back, trying to convey to her that it’s irrelevant. ‘So he wakes me up, clattering round the bedroom, and maybe I’m a bit grumpy but it’s only because I was disappointed, and then he totally flipped out.’

‘Flipped out how?’

‘Oh, he was all like “I need my space”, as though I’m Jenna, planning our wedding after one hand-job and a Polo mint. So I said, if you don’t want me to be here I’ll just go, but it was one in the morning. I never thought he’d say yes, but he was like “Fine”, in this really hard, horrible voice.’ Alice gives way to a sob. ‘I just felt so humiliated, Lulu.’

I put my arms round her. ‘I know it’s a cliché, but it really is his loss.’

‘Oh God, am I actually becoming Jenna? I mean, I love her and everything, but that’s just what we say to her every time she’s made a total tit of herself.’

‘You will *never* be Jenna,’ I tell her emphatically. ‘So did you just walk home in the middle of the night?’

‘Yeah, I was left packing up all my stuff while he watched me. I kept saying “I can’t believe you’re letting me do this”, and he was all like “I didn’t ask you to go”. Which he didn’t, to be fair, it was my suggestion.’

‘To be fair! Alice, he’s behaved like a total bastard.’

‘Yeah, I suppose, but I don’t think he really wanted me to leave.’

Oh no, she’s not wavering is she?

‘How so?’

‘Well, when I got to the door he started telling me to come back, but he’d let me get that far so I wasn’t going to back down. He was shouting down the street after me, but I just refused to turn round.’

‘Good for you.’

‘Then he kept calling me, but I wouldn’t pick up, so then he sent me all these horrible texts.’

She shakily passes over her phone.

> Why won’t you pick up? We need to talk about this

reads the first one – almost reasonable. But by text five Richard’s showing his true colours:

> Your silence is indefensible. It is over: there is no way back.

This is followed by

> It would never have worked – better I know the real you now. Sad but true. Goodbye.

‘What a pompous dickhead. Better *you* know now more like. At least if you know it’s over you can start moving on.’

‘But now he’s saying he didn’t mean it and that we shouldn’t throw it away.’

‘Er, hello. Has he read his own texts?’

She looks at me pleadingly. ‘I know, I know. But he says he sent them in the heat of the moment. He’s rung me about twenty times, begging me to give him another chance.’

‘The heat of the moment? Who goes to the trouble of finding a colon in the heat of the moment? You have to press about five keys to get into the punctuation section. It’s premeditated, case closed.’

Alice pretends to concede, but I can tell that she’s conflicted. I start to feel frustrated with her until I remember that people in affairs shouldn’t throw stones.

‘What is it that you like so much about him?’ I ask as gently as possible, trying to bypass her defences.

‘I don’t know,’ she says, looking up tearily. ‘He makes me feel safe, in a funny kind of a way. He’s so sure of himself. And he’s determined: it takes a lot of guts to set up a business. And he’s clever too – you know he’s got a first in Ancient History?’

I make an impressed face and leave it alone, having decided the best strategy is to play the long game. If I can keep her out of his airspace for a few days, she’ll hopefully start to realize how much better life is without him – although having her by my side brings a whole new raft of problems that I can’t quite bear to take on board right now.

Except of course I’m forced to, as Alice can’t wait to tell me how wonderful Bea is and how adorable she and Charles’s progeny are. She apparently overheard Bea teaching Theo to say ‘Last Carriage to Avon’ and struck up conversation. Being a primary school teacher, she’s a natural with kids, so spent the rest of the journey colouring with Theo and Max and gaily chatting to Bea, little knowing what treacherous waters she was entering. If only Gareth and I hadn’t had our stupid spat I would at least have had some warning. He told her today was a late start and that if she wanted to come up it was the perfect opportunity.

‘He reckoned you seemed really distracted and a bit sad. And then I started thinking you were feeling horrible about that stupid row so I was desperate to come and make it better.’

‘Thanks,’ I say, wishing I wasn’t so muddled. ‘It’s great you’re here.’ Which it kind of is, but for the fact I’m living a lie. ‘I’m gonna have to go to work soon though. I’m sorry to leave you all on your lonesome immediately.’

‘Oh, it’s all right, I’m going to go round and visit Bea. I’m so lucky I’ve got another “Last Carriage” widow to hang out with. How perfect is that?’

Oh. My. God.

‘She really wants to meet you. Apparently Charles says you’re brilliant. I think she wants to try and have us round for supper on Friday or something.’

I shoot across the room, busying myself with the kettle. ‘More tea?’ I ask in a strangulated voice while Alice continues to babble on about her new gal pal. By the time I leave I’ve discovered that Bea is hilariously funny, a devoted mother and loves ‘Sex and the City’ almost as much as us. The perfect foundation for a beautiful friendship – but for the fact that I’m in love with her husband.

I bomb through the countryside, desperate to offload my frustration on him. I’m still furious with him, and yet I also feel like he’s my port in the storm. I rap on his trailer door and he snatches it open, pale and stressed.

‘Can I just tell you again how sorry I am?’

‘You can, but it won’t make any of it any better.’

‘We’re just going to have to bluff it out, Lulu, that’s all we can do.’

‘It’s all right for you, you’re a bloody actor. You’re asking me to lie to the person I’m closest to in the whole world.’ I crumple into a

seat. ‘I just feel like such a horrible person. If Bea’s as lovely as my sister says, I can’t bear what I’ve done to her.’

‘What I’ve done is way worse, but you know as well as I do how hard we tried to turn away.’ He gently strokes the back of my hand as I struggle to summon up the strength to yank it away. ‘It felt unstoppable, at least to me.’

‘Me too,’ I say, knowing I should lie. ‘But the holiday romance is well and truly over, isn’t it?’

He looks at me imploringly. ‘Yes, I suppose it’s got to be. I know what you’re saying, but it seems so wrong that it has to end so abruptly, so horribly.’

‘But there’s no other way for it to end, is there?’ I snap back, voice wobbling. ‘We’re hardly going to walk off into the sunset together.’

‘Hey, come here,’ he says, as I finally give way to a sob. ‘Please let me at least give you a hug.’

He wraps himself around me and I drink in the smell of him, wishing that the comfort it offers wasn’t so necessarily fleeting. I reach up and stroke his face, but when he goes to kiss me I pull away.

‘Don’t, just don’t. I need to leave.’

‘Darling…’

But I’m gone, door slamming behind me. How I wish I could shut the emotional doors so decisively, but even if it were that easy, our lives are inextricably connected for the rest of the week. How the hell am I going to get to the other side unscathed?

Chapter Fourteen

I'm hoping that the fact that Alice and I are operating on different time zones will protect me from too much domestic detail, but alas it's not to be. And it's not entirely Alice's fault: while I know that the information will be like a knife to the heart, I simultaneously crave it. We cross over in the kitchen at around 11.00 the next morning and Alice immediately gives forth. Why is she quite so obsessed with the Adamson family values? Perhaps her friendship with Bea is based on more than temporary rural isolation.

'Max is such a little charmer,' says Alice. 'He was doing all these impressions of his classmates and dancing like the Fimbles. You can totally tell he's the offspring of an actor.'

'I haven't noticed Charles doing any Fimbles dancing,' I say, 'though we haven't shot the ball scene yet.' I'm immediately catapulted into a sense of our intimacy, our closeness. How can a relationship this tangible and important be so destructive? 'So what's Bea like with the children?' I ask, wondering if she's got that same chilly remoteness with them that Charles's description of their marriage conjured up. 'It must be pretty hard for her being at home all the time.'

‘If it is, you wouldn’t know it,’ replies Alice. ‘She seems like a real natural. She’s very focused on them: you don’t get the sense they bore her, like you do with some parents.’

Where’s the frustrated, angry woman that Charles describes? Hell, I guess she started out as an acting tutor. Why would she reveal her inner demons to a friend she’s had for all of twenty-four hours?

‘Anyway, you’ll see for yourself on Friday. I told her to count us in for supper, though I think she might make it more of a party.’

‘What do you mean?’ I ask nervously.

‘Oh, she said Charles has been finding this job a bit of a struggle and she was wondering if she should ask all these tricky customers over and charm them into submission. And she’s determined to shake some hot men out of the tree for us too.’

Can’t she just shake her husband out of the marital bed instead? God strike me down – why do I keep having such evil thoughts? The last thing I want is to turn into some kind of husband-rustling harlot.

‘She’s wasting her time, unless three days away from Richard has left you craving the fat sixty-year-old who’s in charge of the honey wagon.’

‘Honey wagon?’

‘It’s a portable toilet.’

‘Mmm,’ laughs Alice. ‘Still, it’d be quite a luxury to never get caught short. Anyway, I was thinking more about you.’

‘Why?’ I ask suspiciously. ‘I hope you’re not weakening.’

‘Oh, Lulu, he’s been so apologetic. He says he sent flowers, but they got returned because I’m up here.’

‘Give the man a round of applause, he sent some hypothetical carnations. He also dumped you repeatedly, using colons.’

‘I know, I know,’ she says, making an expedient bathroom exit.

She promises me her resolve is still firm and I have little choice but to believe her. Besides, I’m too tired for a full-scale counter-brainwashing operation. Night shoots provide a peculiar kind of jet lag, and I fall into a welcome coma as soon as my head hits the pillow. I return to set at six, only to find the schedule’s been shuffled to accommodate Charles’s unexpected illness.

‘Pansy flu,’ mutters Tarquin as he rehearses Emily for a scene in which she sobs pensively and prettily on a moonlit bench. Her face lights up when I bustle over to rearrange her ridiculously low-cut serving wench outfit. I swear she’s turned it down over her bountiful breasts in order to give the nation’s red-blooded men more of an eyeful. Little does she know that period drama is almost exclusively watched by sixty-plus women in pince-nez, none of whom will be in the least impressed by a pair of knockers that look like warring puppies in a playpen.

‘Hope Charlie’s going to be well enough for his own party!’ she says.

‘Oh,’ I say flatly. ‘The party.’

‘You have been invited, yeah?’ asks Emily keenly, displaying that sly perceptiveness that always catches me out.

‘Yes, I know about it,’ I tell her, which isn’t quite the same thing. How come he’s texted her and not texted me? And is he really ill, or simply lying low?

‘I thought you must’ve been, what with you being such good friends and everything. We could do with a bit of a piss-up, all in all.’

‘I’m sure it’ll be a riot!’ I tell her brightly, trying to yank some extra fabric over the mammary mountain.

‘Tell you what, why don’t we get ready together?’ she suggests. ‘I could get some fizz in and you can help me pick my best outfit, and –’

I cut short this vision of Friday-night perfection.

‘That sounds brilliant, Emily, but my twin sister’s staying…’

‘Double bubble – I’ll come to you. I love it when you get twins, it’s so mad and weird.’

Great, I can provide a freak show for my most treasured friend in all the world. I try to slip away prior to the eight takes of weeping, but Tarquin’s having a needy moment. ‘Want my dress lady,’ he says in a baby voice, grabbing my hand. I don’t know who he’s channelling today, but it’s strangely chilling. When they’re setting up the next shot he invites me back to his caravan, lighting up a tiny, pretentious cigar en route. Soon we’re ensconced, with me subtly trying to diffuse the noxious smoke that’s filling the tiny metal box.

‘What’s up, Lulu?’ he says, gyrating his shoulders in a curious fashion. ‘What gives?’

‘Um, what gives? Well, I don’t know, Tarquin, I’m just throwing all my firepower at the ball, and hoping that I’m going to deliver you the kind of spectacle you’re craving.’

Why am I talking like it’s the 1940s and English is my second language? I find him so utterly unpredictable that it’s impossible to relax.

‘Now that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.’

‘The ball?’

‘The ball indeed. I’ve had a bit of a change of heart, slight handbrake turn in my directorial vision.’ I look at him, stony-faced, and he gives a fake laugh. ‘We’re all allowed to take the road less travelled once in a while. Having Damien’s input has made me take stock.’

‘And what’s occurred to you, Tarquin?’

‘The ball’s small, let’s kick ass with the wedding!’ He’s drumming on the Formica table with a pencil, speaking in a strange rap. ‘It’s gotta be the climax, Percy’s got his dame, he’s standing up for what he believes in. Love’s all that matters, Lulu, whatever the cost. That’s the point!’

I stare at him, emotional and practical reactions fighting for supremacy. Is he right, for once in his pointless little life? Is love all that matters? And even if it is, how am I going to claw back all the money I’ve spent on ball gowns and redirect it into the kind of elegant and restrained ensembles that a lavish wedding demands? Tarquin’s dismissive of the latter, and I choose not to share the former.

‘Dye them, Lulu, or cut into them with your magic scissors.’ He maniacally mimes cutting, just in case English really is my second language.

‘Have you talked to Suzanne about your change of heart?’

He waves away my concern. ‘She’s fine with it.’

‘So Damien’s obviously quite an inspiration right now.’

‘He’s my sparring partner, mate.’ He bounces around, shadow boxing. ‘He’s razed the citadel and blown me away.’

‘God, Tarquin, I’m so intrigued. Can’t you show it to me?’ I gesture towards the DVD player that’s set up in the corner.

‘Oh, no you don’t,’ he says teasingly. ‘You need to view it properly, when we can give it the focused attention it deserves. When we’re back on home turf: you and me, head to head with episode one.’

I sincerely hope he means in the edit suite, not in his hideous lair. The last thing I want to do is to start getting social with Tarquin, although the sociability’s set to commence this very Friday, at the party I’d most like to body-swerve in the whole wide world. I’d prefer to partake in Secret Santa with Charles Manson. Two days to go and counting.

Perhaps Tarquin’s ridiculous handbrake turn is a blessing in disguise, as I’m forced to wholly absorb myself in constructing a wedding far more opulent than I’d ever imagined. Suzanne’s as furious as I expected, but Tarquin’s got the executive producer eating out of his hand, so there’s little she can do. Gareth and I kiss

and make up remotely, and he promises to go to the costumiers and charm them into coughing up a job lot of suitably spiffing garb, while I try to squeeze more cash out of Suzanne. So far she's having none of it, invoking Zelda's superior skills and implying that my only hope of winning her round is if I get a look at the cut.

Zelda, Zelda, Zelda. Gareth hasn't managed to rouse her, and she hasn't called me for a good fortnight. She often complains that the phone's like a croaking frog demanding attention, so I decide to email her instead.

> Dearest Zelda, Yorkshire is cold and beautiful and pointless without you. I know you loathe sentiment, but I miss you inordinately. I'd love to ask your advice about a million things, but most of all I'd just like to have a hot chocolate with a nip of whisky in the caravan and hear the Peter O'Toole story right from the top. Please can I come and see you once I'm home? Or perhaps you'll be ready to come back by then. Suzanne thinks I'm a rank amateur, but I'm doing my best, I promise. Lots of love, Lulu xxx

Just writing to Zelda allows me to somehow access what she'd pronounce. I know she'd say it's not a time for flamboyant artistry; instead I need to go back to basics, study the books and work out exactly what would've been worn at the time. Luckily I've brought a pile of weighty costume tomes with me, so I set off home, trying to keep focused on the job in hand. If I can distract myself enough, perhaps the dull ache inside will subside quicker than I think.

Alice has got music blaring out and a pot of water bubbling up for pasta. I give her a hug, perhaps too emphatic for a six-hour separation, and gratefully accept a glass of wine.

‘God, Barry’s a genius,’ she says, toasting me. She’s playing ‘Copacabana’ and jiving round the kitchen with the spaghetti.

‘I know. I think he might be playing the O2 in the summer.’

‘That’s it, we’re going!’

‘Consider it booked,’ I say, chinking again.

I’m mightily relieved that I haven’t got some weird cool sibling who listens to underground dark music and thinks Magic FM is for retards. Soon we’re wailing along to ‘Mandy’ as we smother our pasta in Parmesan.

‘Good day, fat face?’ she says, as it subsides.

‘You know, kinda mixed. I’m speaking to Gareth, which is good, but I’m going to need to cut up all your favourite clothes and dye them, which is bad.’

‘Very funny.’

‘How about you?’ I ask, then dread the answer. What if she went round to hang out with her new BF and came across Charles in his pyjamas? Now they’re in each other’s airspace, I’m not sure I’m going to be able to sustain the deception. Luckily, Bea, the world’s most devoted wife, discouraged her coming over because of Charles’s man flu. (Is he really ill? Is he a good enough actor to feign a temperature and streaming nose?) Instead she stayed at home, working on her lesson plans and constructing supper.

‘And not talking to Richard?’

‘And not talking to Richard,’ she confirms, sustaining eye contact for a convincing length of time. ‘Instead I made a cake! I am literally your wife.’

Maybe this sounds as weird and creepy as Emily says twins are, but sometimes I almost wish she were. Not in a gruesome, incestuous way, but I do find it hard to imagine anyone making me happier than she does. There is no one I feel more sure of, no one with whom I'm more certain that I'm loved. When one of us does meet the man of our dreams (sans wedding ring), it'll be a bittersweet triumph. Of course, it will be wonderful, but it'll also sound the death knell for the relationship that's defined us since we were nothing more than a rogue maternal egg. Is it any wonder we need to make sure any potential candidate is more than worthy of the sacrifice?

Alice is bustling around in the larder (yes, there's a larder!), finally emerging with a huge biscuit, much like a chocolatey paving slab. She's spelled out 'Sorry' in Minstrels across the middle of it.

'I didn't have a recipe, so I tried to make an enormous brownie, but then I kind of burnt it and it didn't have much interest in rising.'

'You didn't have to apologize for that! Though I never say no to a Minstrel.'

'No, it's sorry for being so moody about what you said about Dad. I want you to be able to say whatever you want to say.'

'I know you do,' I say, even though I'm not entirely convinced. I know she *thinks* she does: it's not quite the same thing. 'But Dad really doesn't. He just shuts the conversation down if I try to talk to him.'

But Alice is off, racing across the course with solutions.

‘We should go to Boston and force him to hang out with us. We could take the train down to New York and –’

‘Yeah, maybe we should. But do you think he’d talk about things any more there than here?’

Alice looks at me a bit blank-faced and I blunder on. ‘About Mum, you know, what she was really like.’

A cloud crosses Alice’s face.

‘We know what she was like. She was… she was Mum.’

‘Exactly! What she was like beyond being our mum? What she was like to be married to, what she was like before we were born? What he fell in love with, I don’t know – what he didn’t love about her…’ I can feel myself choking up as I think of all the gaps in my knowledge. How much I wish I could ask her the questions, rather than trying to piece her together from wisps and fragments. ‘Why doesn’t he tell us?’

‘I’m sure he would,’ says Alice airily. ‘But, Lulu, don’t you think you might be making it all more of a drama than it needs to be? You can be such a worrywart sometimes. Now, do you want coffee or more wine?’

Alice busies herself clearing up while I go and retrieve my stack of books, trying not to feel like one of her five-year-old pupils who’s cried a bit too much when they’ve grazed their knee. I attempt to focus on the fact that she’s at least acknowledged our row and her kindly brewing of the much-needed coffee which gets me through my midnight work marathon – basically, what’s good, rather than what’s really annoying. Even so, I’m still left feeling grumpy enough

to go and poo in a sandpit unbidden. I venture outside to see if Zelda's mailed me back, fervently hoping she has. I go to the bottom of the freezing cold garden, the one place where there's a scrap of signal, and hold my BlackBerry up to the moon. Success!

> Chin up, baby cakes, I know you'll be triumphing left, right and centre. Know this: you'll remember this brief interlude with shiny-eyed nostalgia once I'm back on-set making you crochet mob caps until your fingers bleed. Meanwhile I'm expecting you here next Tuesday at 10 a.m. sharp. Don't be late, Lulu, it's your least impressive quality. Thank goodness you redeem yourself in so many other ways. With love and good wishes, Zelda x.

I almost cry with relief. Zelda will make everything all right, I know she will. She'll crush Suzanne into submission or persuade Peter O'Toole to donate his costume back catalogue in exchange for her silence. I kiss Alice goodnight, thanking her for the cake, and sink into bed, determined to sleep the sleep of the just. As I'm so not entitled, I lie there thinking of Charles, wondering if he's thinking of me too or if I've melted from his consciousness now real life's arrived wholesale. Maybe he's tossing and turning in some kind of Victorian fever, calling out my name involuntarily from deep within his nightshirt.

Judging by his streaming nose, bronchial cough and sheepish smile the next morning, he might well've been. He's queuing for a bacon sandwich when I spot him, hacking into a hankie. Oh God, why do we have to get reacquainted in front of an entire line of hungry cast and crew?

‘Hi, hon!’ tinkles Emily, piling greasy sausages on to a paper plate. How does she stay so thin? ‘Looking forward to the party?’ I try my very best not to swivel towards Charles, but even from the corner of my eye I can see how stricken he looks.

‘Yeah, should be great,’ I stutter.

‘Good on you, Charlie!’ says Emily, earning herself a pinched smile. ‘Thought you might have to cancel, but you’re way too much of a party animal.’

‘Believe me, I tried,’ says Charles, casting me a plaintive look. ‘But my wife’s very persuasive.’

My wife: it hurts so much when he says those words, even though I’ve got no right to my anguish when I’m nothing but a pariah.

‘Come on, Emily,’ I say with forced jollity. ‘Let’s go and get you dressed.’

She and Charles are first up, in a scene rescheduled from yesterday. Charles has done his duty and married Lady Victoria, but he can’t flush out his feelings for Emily. Little wonder when she keeps handing him port in ludicrously low-cut serving garb, nipples eagerly standing to attention. I start my daily battle to create more coverage, feeling like a stern Italian *nonna*.

‘Stop it!’ she giggles, yanking the bib front of her dress down. Is she flirting with me? I honestly think she believes there’s no one impervious to her charms: men, women, iguanas. We compromise somewhere between our differing ideas of propriety and I lace her up at the back.

‘Can you do me a favour, sweetheart?’ she asks, head fetchingly cocked. Oh my God: what if she’s actually a lesbian? Maybe her grey-haired PR guru’s suggested that a burst of bisexuality will give her profile a pneumatic boost.

‘What do you need?’ I ask her uncertainly.

‘Can you run through my lines with me? Be Charlie boy? I’m sure you can do him to a tee. I got a bit tipsy with the camera boys last night and I didn’t do my homework. Naughty Emily!’ she adds, playfully slapping her own hand.

‘Um, OK. I’m the world’s worst actress though.’

‘I’m sure you’re not,’ she says, digging out the script from her handbag. I can see her point once we get started, as when you take the nipples out of the equation it’s clear the world’s worst actress has to be her. I try my hardest to distract myself with this fact, rather than allowing the schlocky but horribly pertinent dialogue to undo me. We try it once, before she disastrously asks me to switch round and play Bertha so she can get a perspective on the whole scene. There’s some awkward preamble before we get to the meat of the conversation.

‘Bertha, the pain of losing you is a wound so deep that it threatens my very existence,’ honks Emily.

‘Sir, the strictures of society would never allow us to find the happiness we craved. We must not talk of what we felt. It must be banished, extinguished.’

‘You are wise beyond your years, and I am all too conscious that I am married to another, yet still my unruly heart will not listen to

reason.' Emily pronounces unruly 'unrowly' which does rather ruin the line, but still I feel myself tearing up like the cretin I am.

'We must control ourselves, sir, we must be stronger than the fire that burns so brightly inside each of our breasts.'

Emily snorts. 'No one's gonna be setting fire to these babies, not on my watch.' She looks at me curiously. 'Are you all right, darling? Dunno why you said you couldn't act – if I could cry on demand like that, Tarquin would wet himself.'

'Yeah, no, I'm fine. Just tired.'

'Well, don't go welching on the party tonight – you're my wingman!'

Just then the third assistant director bursts in to say Emily's needed on-set, saving me any more awkward interrogation. I walk down with her, trying my best to compose myself. I think Tarquin might've sprinkled an E on his cornflakes, as he envelops me in an enthusiastic bear hug before marching Emily off to discuss the scene.

'Lulu, could you do me a favour?' shouts over Kris, the handsome, bearded director of photography. What is it with me and favours this morning? 'Emily's stand-in's got this bloody flu bug. Can you step into the shot so we can line it up?'

Forcing myself to swallow down the lump in my throat, I sit on the chaise longue they're using, then get up as Charles's stand-in grabs my wrist for the scene's denouement.

'That's right,' shouts Kris. 'Now turn her towards us.'

We wheel round, straight into the eye line of the approaching Charles.

‘There he is!’ says Kris. ‘Step out of the shot, Mike, and we’ll try it with Charles.’

Oh no. Charles reluctantly steps in, his soulful eyes telling me how much pain he’s in. I try to silently communicate how much it’s hurting me too, then wonder if steely imperviousness would help us both more.

‘Take her wrist, step a bit closer towards her. That’s it, lovely!’

‘We must stop meeting like this,’ he mutters, breaking the tension. I laugh, trying hard not to enjoy the feeling of his hand encircling my wrist.

‘Hold it while I check the shot with Tark the Nark,’ shouts Kris cheerily, leaving us in our strange tableau for a good two minutes.

‘Are you OK?’ whispers Charles.

‘What do you think?’ I ask.

‘If you feel anything like as glum as me, I’m desperately sorry.’

I’m horribly aware of how many people are lurking around, bored and hungry for scandal. Still, no one can hear us, and we’ve got a damn good excuse for our close proximity. Maybe I need to borrow a bit of Bertha’s will-power, even if I know the happy ending that rewards her won’t be on the cards.

‘We’ll be back in London tomorrow, with this gruesome party behind us, and off the job in a month,’ I hiss. ‘We know that we’ve got to extinguish it, it’s all we can do.’

‘Extinguish it?’

‘Yes, you know, the fire.’ Oh God, I’m so flustered that I’m taking it all too literally. If I’m not careful, my breasts are going to spontaneously combust. Fortunately Tarquin’s OK’d the shot, so we’re released. I jerk backward awkwardly on to Charles’s toes, mutter an apology and then rush off to the wardrobe caravan. I’m halfway back before I realize that I’m involuntarily gripping my wrist where his hand’s been.

Gareth’s left me four messages, demanding I call him immediately. He snatches the phone up on the first ring.

‘At last! What wickedness have you been up to that’s kept you from your phone all morning?’

‘Oh, you know, arsing around on-set. The usual.’

‘Bor-ing. You are long overdue for some scandal.’ Scandal is literally the last thing I need. ‘Perhaps now you’ve got that minx of a sister on site, you’ll get led astray. She should’ve packed that outrageously handsome rozzer in her hand luggage.’

Ali, I wonder how he is? Part of me would love to see him again, but asking him if he wants to be friends seems beyond patronizing considering my appalling behaviour. Gareth’s right, he is gorgeous. I should at least requisition him for someone else: maybe he’s the long-term solution to the Richard virus.

‘Anyway,’ continues Gareth, ‘that wasn’t the purpose of my call. There’s a serious costume drought.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The Americans have stormed into town and staged a smash and grab. They’re shooting some ghastly Hollywood version of a Mrs

Gaskell novel and they've decimated Angels. Even if we had enough money to hire anything, there's nothing to be had.'

'Couldn't we take it for a couple of weeks and then send it back? Besides, they can't possibly have taken everything.'

'I know I'm something of an exaggerator, but this is the God's honest truth. They're positively swimming in green-backs so they're keeping their options open by snaffling it all. Every last frock is being packed into crates and shipped out to LA when the production moves back next month.'

'Oh God, oh God, oh God. I wonder if we could speak to them? Or get Zelda to? Meanwhile, we'll just have to work on the basis that we're making it all from scratch.'

Gareth and I chew it over a while longer then I literally go back to the drawing board, trying to work out if there's something parsimonious to be done with flimsy muslin and floppy hats. I also research who the rival costume designer is, discovering to my horror that it's Oscar-winning legend Timothy Le Grande. Le Grande is all too appropriate a name: whippet thin and silvery, he's so aloof and self-important that even Zelda is cowed by him. I think she trained under him in the distant past, but their one-time association makes him no less condescending. Fat chance of sweet-talking him into sharing his precious crinoline stash.

I suppress the serpents of stress crawling round my stomach, forcing myself to stay focused. As a result, it's 8 o'clock before I know it: I speed home, tumbling through the door to share the horror of Emily's master plan with Alice. She's more thrilled than

horrified – there aren't many stars of 'EastEnders' hanging around the corridors of Sandringham primary school, and she's unaccountably keen to ask her what Ian Beale's really like (despite me pleading with her not to). It's kind of sweet in a way, though I reckon the novelty will wear off after two hours of Emily's inevitable monologue about her hair extensions/nipple piercings/pubic topiary.

She's banging on the door long before I've extinguished Alice's star-struck madness, bearing the very same bottle of Co-op bubbly that Charles and I shared that fateful night.

'Viva la party!' she shrieks, presumptuously rifling through the cupboards for glasses. She fills three to the brim before proposing an unexpected toast to me. 'Your sister's a little bit of wardrobe magic,' she tells Alice. 'She's the only person I trust.' Is it me or is she about the third person on this job to make that statement?

'That's not true,' I say, embarrassed. 'You trust Charles.' Oh God, why do I keep doing that ridiculous giveaway of bringing any conversation back to him?

'I s'pose so,' she concedes, 'but he's not a mate.'

And suddenly I feel a wave of compassion for her. Yes, she's a spoiled brat, but celebrity is most definitely a curse as well as a blessing. However hard she tries to conceal it, I can see Alice is still impressed, unable to relate to Emily as a random work colleague that's pitched up. No wonder she thinks my lack of dazzlement signifies something special. If you're famous, you can either choose to believe the hype, that you're somehow worthy of open-mouthed

awe, or not believe the hype and permanently feel like a fraud. Either way you're buggered and that's before you factor in your near-inevitable fall from grace. Rest assured that in a few years' time Emily will be praying to get a call from 'I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out of Here', even if right now she thinks she's too good to chow down on marsupial testicles for sport.

I simply smile in reply. 'So what did you bring?' I ask her, gesturing to the bulging holdall she's dragged in.

'I pretty much emptied my closet,' she says. 'No offence, but you don't always work your own look all that hard.' Bloody cheek. She can swan in at whatever random call time she's decreed: I'm freezing my arse off in that caravan by 6.30 most mornings. It's hard to see beyond a warm pair of jeans when you're dressing in the dark (unless Charles is in, of course).

'Thanks,' I say through gritted teeth before recoiling in horror at the selection of Lycra handkerchiefs she's showcasing.

'And you, Alice,' she says encouragingly, before casting a critical eye over our roundy bodies. She shrugs. 'No matter, most of these are stretchy.' Alice shoots me a frightened look as Emily waves a hot-pink monstrosity in her face.

'Um, I'm not sure if that's quite me,' she tells her tentatively.

'If there's one thing your sister's taught me, it's that you've gotta be braver about colour,' she insists. I did indeed tell her that, but only because a particularly lurid swirly purple silk was heavily discounted in Berwick Street market – this must be a special wardrobe version of karma. A little too intimidated to say no, Alice

goes upstairs to squeeze herself into it. When she comes down I realize that I hadn't seen the front, which is emblazoned with a lightning flash with SEX written in capitals through it. I try to wipe the abject horror off my face.

'You look wicked!' says Emily, clapping with delight. 'Once we've got Lulu fixed up, you two are gonna look so crazy together.' She looks back and forth between us like we're in a particularly slutty circus and sets to work finding me something equally monstrous to wear. I jump in.

'It's a really eye-catching dress, but are you sure –'

Emily cuts across me. 'Yeah, she looks really cool.'

'I wasn't sure at first, but now I like it,' says Alice, preening in the mirror. Is she mad? She's behaving like it's Kate Moss who's thrown open the doors of her wardrobe. I cast her a questioning look, but she just pulls the dress down a fraction and smiles back. Emily's on a roll now, and I sense I'm vulnerable. She holds up scrap after scrap of rainbow-hued fabric.

'No… It's brave, but no… Thanks, Emily, but I think I'll pass.'

After I've rejected about four million of her suggestions, she starts to scowl. 'I wanted to dress you for once, Lulu. I do know quite a bit about fashion as it happens. Evans asked me to design a range, but I said I didn't really get fat girls.'

'It's a lovely thought, but I think I'll just wear my boring old black dress. It never lets me down.' I give a self-deprecating shrug and try to escape upstairs to retrieve it, only to find my own twin has turned against me.

‘Come on, Lulu, how about this one?’ she says, pulling a yellow frilly number out from the middle of the pile that I would only countenance if I were going to a party as Big Bird. Not that Emily would have any truck with a Big Bird, of course.

‘Yeah, it’s lovely, but…’ Emily’s got a slightly evil look in her eye now and I’m reminded how much she hates to be contradicted. Before I know it, I’ve been forced to try it on and parade around the living room.

‘Wear it, wear it, wear it!’ chant Emily and Alice boisterously. What the hell’s happened to my sane sister? Casting a look at the near-empty bottle, all becomes clear: knowing how miserable she is about Richard, it’s no surprise she’s drowning her sorrows. Our cab arrives right in the middle of their strange tribal dance and before I know it I’ve been manhandled inside. How could I let this happen?

Emily and Alice shriek and giggle all the way there, while I take deep calming breaths. When we pull up, I let them tear up the path, slowly bringing up the rear. It’s Charles who opens the door.

‘Hi!’ he says, before doing a horrified double take at Alice’s ‘Sex’ dress. ‘Wow, Lulu, that’s quite a dress you’re sporting.’

I step out of the shadows, mortified by my only minimally less terrible outfit.

‘Charles, meet my twin sister, Alice. Alice, Charles.’

‘Enchanted,’ says a drunken Alice, extending a hand.

‘The famous twin, do come in. And Emily, you’re looking lovely as ever.’

He steps aside to let us in, eyes communicating to me what an ordeal it is, then does another double take as the full horror of the yellow peril is revealed. I so wish I could tell him I'm wearing it under duress.

Fuck it, that's the least of my problems. Bea's the first person we encounter once we're through the door, hugging Alice enthusiastically in a way that makes it obvious it's her. Charles hovers, then slips away, jaw set, as I stare at the patch of carpet which once housed my knickers. Bea both confounds and confirms what I'd imagined. There's a poise that I knew she'd have; she commands the space in a way that I can't quite put my finger on. She's more handsome than pretty, tall and muscular, with strong, well-turned features. Her long, dark hair hangs down her back like a glossy curtain, while her fitted black dress is plain but expensive-looking. She knows what works for her age and she's dressing into it, rather than fighting it. The overall effect is a woman who knows who she is, who's in control. But there's also a warmth and inclusiveness that I hadn't anticipated. Perhaps it just suited me too well to paint her as Cruella De Vil. A wave of guilt hits me as she moves her attention to me: please let this destructive mess have been about more than a passing desire to shag a younger model.

'Well, it's patently obvious who you are!' she says, laughing. 'I'm Bea, Charles's wife.' I try my best to smile as she loops an arm in mine, drawing me into the living room. 'Let me find you a drink,' she says, voice dropping as she continues, 'and let me also tell you

how bloody grateful I am to you for keeping my husband on the straight and narrow.'

Can this really be happening to me?

'What do you mean?' I ask, high-pitched.

'Oh, he really didn't want to do it. All ruffs and muffs he said, but it's a slow time of year and I begged him to just take the pay cheque.' She's set up a drinks table in the corner of the room. 'Vodka Martini OK by you?'

Martinis contain way too much alcohol for my liking, but I'm in no mood to argue. She drops her voice again.

'Anyway, he says you're the sanest person on the whole bloody job, a real mate. And judging by what a hoot your sister is, I'm sure it's no exaggeration.' Would he really have said that? I guess he might be clumsily covering his tracks by declaring half his hand up front – I am SO out of my depth with all of this. Bea hands me a huge Martini glass and chinks her own against it. 'So thank you, Lulu – you're helping to keep our children from the poorhouse. Or at least in socks.'

Socks, sex: who's counting? Is this some elaborate double bluff to flush out if there's anything going on? Bea's clearly no fool and I can't help wondering if it's a trap. That said, there's a sincerity about her that makes me think she's straight up.

Nearly as straight up as the Martini, which I seem to have inhaled in a single gulp. I spy Tarquin bowling through the door in a ridiculous pinstripe suit and trilby combo, and experience the entirely unfamiliar sensation of being thrilled to see him.

‘Bea, you must meet Tarquin!’ I shriek with ludicrous enthusiasm.

‘Tark the Nark,’ she replies conspiratorially. ‘You’re right, I must.’

She leads the charge, effortlessly enveloping him in a cloud of warmth and charm. All his spiky conversational power play melts away as he sucks contentedly on the Martini she proffers like a baby on a nipple.

‘Charles has been so impressed by your approach to it all,’ she tells him gaily. ‘You’re a real breath of fresh air.’

Hot air, more like. I peel off, desperate to find Alice, only to find her deep in conversation with Charles.

‘Aah, Lulu,’ he croaks awkwardly, rocking back and forth. ‘We were just talking about you.’

‘All good, I hope,’ I replay, faux jolly, feeling like I’m at a Conservative Party fundraiser in Weybridge.

‘More than good!’ says Alice. ‘Charles is your second biggest fan after Emily. Who knew how clever my little sister was?’ she continues, giving me a hug.

‘Little?’ asks Charles.

‘Eight minutes,’ we chorus.

Charles gives a smile that reaches all the way to his eyes and lights up his face, the sort you produce when someone you love does something heartbreakingly endearing. You know, the kind of thing that shouldn’t even register it’s so insignificant to the average person, but that love goggles magnify to the power of ten. I’ve always thought that love is not something you can judge via what a person says – it’s more in the eyes, the way in which their pupils

dilate when they gaze at you. Charles must detect he's overstepped the mark, as he swiftly wipes the gorgeously sappy expression from his lovely face. Oh God. Falling in love is one thing; wading back out of the emotional quicksand is quite another. I will never take love lightly again: it's a substance as hazardous and dangerous as kryptonite.

I'm so lost in reflection that I miss Bea's approach. Suddenly she's at Charles's elbow, cocking her head towards his chest.

'What have I missed?'

There are a million different ways to answer that question. Luckily Charles chooses an innocuous one.

'We're just discovering how much more mature and sophisticated Alice is than her errant twin.'

'Ooh, Lulu seems pretty sophisticated to me,' says Bea, looking at me keenly. She and Charles are close, but they're not quite touching. Is she leaning in to him, or is their close proximity a natural fusion? I try to stop my eyes flickering between them for clues.

'Excuse me, have you seen my outfit?' I ask her.

Bea laughs. 'It's fun. God, I wish I was still the right side of forty and could throw on whatever I liked.'

Alice jumps in and says all the right things about how great she looks, while I work on my exit strategy. Luckily Bea beats me to it.

'Darling, you really must talk to Tarquin,' she tells Charles. 'Go and make him feel loved. And will you just pop to the kitchen and get some ice out of the deep freeze?'

'Think I'll duck out for a fag first,' he says.

She looks at him admonishingly. He stares back, silent, while Alice and I try not to make it obvious how awkward we feel.

'It's a party!' he says, defensive, but trying to keep it light. She shrugs, gives him a pinched smile. I hate that I'm feeling a tiny bit pleased, a tiny bit reassured that there's evidence to support his claims about the marriage. 'See you in a wee while, ladies,' he says, disappearing off. I'm sensing Bea's still irritated as she scans the room for her next target. The beam of her attention fixes on Emily.

'Excuse me for a moment,' she says, striding over purposefully.

'Do you know where the loo is?' asks Alice.

'There's one at the top of the stairs on the right and one behind the kitchen,' I tell her, before unwisely volunteering to get us another Martini. Perhaps if I'm seeing double I won't know which Bea to be terrified of. I hang around the drinks table, trying to control my anxiety.

'Penny for them,' says Tarquin, dragging on another one of his choking cigars.

'Oh, you know. Frocks, jerkins, tabards… I'm pretty shallow.'

'Are you?' he asks beadily.

'Um, I hope not. No, no, I'm not.'

'Didn't think so.'

What's that supposed to mean? Is it a compliment or something altogether more sinister? I feel like I'm swimming with a particularly pointless shoal of sharks. Case in point: here comes Emily, Martini glass aloft, with my bizarrely outfitted sister in tow. Emily paws my arm drunkenly.

‘Charlie’s wife is the best! She teaches acting, right, but she said she couldn’t fault me in “Enders”. Shannon was her favourite character for years. She said I was – I was… nuanced.’

‘Well, cheers to that,’ says Tarquin with uncharacteristic generosity.

‘Yes, cheers,’ says Alice, focused on me.

I decide the only way to get through the night is to be something of a social butterfly, flitting between people too quickly to have time to reflect. I avoid Charles at all costs, which conversely requires tracking his movements like a human GPS. Despite all the complications, I’m so glad to have Alice by my side, a welcome oasis in the midst of rocky terrain. And what a double act we make, a magnificent novelty that people long to fathom out. The questions we’re asked are always variations on a theme, but tonight they’re reassuringly familiar rather than head-thumpingly obvious. Maybe I should just accept that I’m better as a half than a whole. ‘Do you have weird, spooky, psychic twin moments?’ asks Kris, and we tell him about all the times we’ve come back with exactly the same outfit when we’ve gone out shopping separately (I swear Alice gave me a Chinese burn for this particular crime when we were thirteen, but she flatly denies it). Then there are the multiple occasions we’ve given each other the same birthday present, rather ruining the surprise. And the two or three times a day I might call Alice and get an engaged tone, only to find it’s because she’s picked that exact same moment to call me.

‘Though she’s called me less on this job,’ confides Alice to Tarquin. ‘You’re obviously keeping her too busy.’ I smile at her when she says this, trying to drain the sadness from my eyes. This relationship’s come at quite a price.

‘See, freaky deaky!’ says Emily, who’s trailed around after us, fascinated by every detail. ‘I wish I had a twin.’ Two Emilys, that’s quite a thought. Although Emily wouldn’t be Emily if she were a twin; she’d have had someone reminding her that she wasn’t altogether unique and extraordinary right from the off. I excuse myself to go for a pee – who knew my bladder could hold four vodka Martinis – but find there’s a queue. I head for the other bathroom, only to find a sign at the bottom of the stairs: *Children sleeping, please do not ascend!* I turn back, right into the path of Charles, who’s peering outside for a cab.

‘Lulu. There you are!’ He drops his voice. ‘How ghastly is this?’ He’s conspiratorial, but also slightly wry. Surely he can’t be finding this funny? That said, I think he’s even drunker than me, and if I didn’t know better I’d suspect there’s a whiff of spliff coming off him.

‘Really ghastly,’ I mutter.

There’s so much I want to ask, so much I want to say, but there’s too much danger of someone else appearing. I give him a brief smile then try to walk past, only to find he’s reaching out to stop me.

‘Charles,’ I hiss, ‘please don’t make it obvious.’ He pulls a puppy dog face which I ignore, pulling away and going in search of Alice.

‘I really think we should go,’ I say. ‘I’ve got to get the house straight before we leave and I’m starting to wilt.’

‘It’s just getting good,’ implores Emily. She grabs Alice’s hand. ‘I’ll tell you everything you want to know about Nigel Harman, and I mean *everything*.’

Oh no, surely my drunken sister won’t be able to resist an offer that good. But Alice looks back and forth between us before saying an apologetic no. ‘I think Lulu really does need to get back. I’ll ask Bea to ring us a cab.’

‘Off already?’ says Bea. ‘Let me get Charles on the case.’

‘Oh no,’ I say, ‘I can ring one.’

‘It’s no trouble,’ she says, calling out of the French doors at the back, ‘Darling, you’re needed. Can you come back inside and call the girls a cab?’

‘Hang on a tick,’ he shouts back. Charles is amongst a throng of smokers hanging out under the apple tree outside. Bea rolls her eyes at us, smiling apologetically.

‘It’s fine,’ I say, but she persists.

‘Darling, they really do want to get going.’

‘Consider it done,’ says Charles tersely, re-entering the room and weaving his way towards the phone. The call is brief and to the point, after which he retreats back to the garden. When the cab hoots outside, Bea hugs us both in turn, pausing to look me full in the face.

‘Such a treat to finally meet you, Lulu – you must come and visit us in London. Besides, the children will never forgive me if Alice

doesn't come and read them their bedtime story at least once a week!'

'Lovely to meet you too,' I say, 'and thank you.' The thank you is a little too emphatic. I'm hoping it means I'm desperately sorry in some obscure language I'm yet to learn.

'Shall I go and retrieve Charles? I know he'll want to say goodbye.'

'Oh, not to worry,' I say quickly, throwing open the door and letting in a gust of Arctic wind. 'I see him all the time at – at work.'

I link arms with Alice, pulling her slippily towards the cab. Once we're bundled in I breathe an audible sigh of relief, exhaling a great cloud of cold air. Alice turns to me abruptly.

'So when exactly were you planning to share?'

'Share what?'

'The truth about you and Charles.'

Chapter Fifteen

Even if I wanted to, there's no point lying.

'How'd you guess?'

'How stupid do you think I am? It's obvious there's been something up for ages. And tonight it was s-o-o-o blatant.'

'Was it?'

'Oh, Lulu. The way he kissed me and Emily hello and body-swerved you, the whole way you look at each other. And that sign was the last straw.'

'The sign?'

'Yes, the sign,' snaps back Alice. 'How would you've known there was another loo upstairs when it was out of bounds? You've shagged him, haven't you?'

'Scuse me, ladies,' pipes up the cab driver, amusement rippling through his tone, 'don't want to interrupt, but is this cottage up on the left or back towards Bracksome?'

What must he think of me? And how the hell am I supposed to know where we are when there are no STREET SIGNS?

'I'm not quite sure – do you have a GPS?' I ask him, even though the answer's patently obvious.

‘Nope, just nouse. How’s about I drive you back to the party and we give it another try?’

‘No!’ we shout in unison.

‘I’ll – I’ll direct you,’ I volunteer and then proceed to get us hopelessly lost. At least my pathetic attempt at directions negates the need for any more chat about Charles. By the time we finally arrive back, I’m wondering if I can get away with sneaking off to bed. My head’s thumping and my heart’s in freefall, but Alice won’t have it. She makes a pot of coffee and gets into bed beside me.

‘Has he been in here?’ she asks.

‘Yes,’ I say quietly.

‘Lulu, why would you do this to yourself?’ she asks, less sharp. ‘All it can do is make you unhappy.’

‘Do you think I don’t know that?’ I say, a sob rising in my throat. ‘I didn’t mean it to happen, but it was – it was unstoppable…’

‘I would have bloody stopped it if you’d bothered to tell me. What a wanker.’

Her tone tells me loud and clear how hurt she is that I didn’t confide, but I can’t engage with that right now.

‘He’s not a wanker, Alice, and I’ve stopped it myself now.’

‘He *is* a wanker, he has to be a wanker to do this to Bea. And to you.’

‘It’s not as straightforward as you think it is.’

‘Yes it is. Stop defending him, he’s behaved appallingly. You’re not still hung up on him, are you?’

I don’t answer her, simply turning my face towards the wall.

‘You are then.’

‘I’m not *hung up* on him, Alice,’ I say, my voice rising. ‘I love him.’

‘You don’t love him, you’re infatuated with him. It’s completely different.’

‘Don’t patronize me! I know what love feels like, OK?’

‘You don’t know him! How can you possibly love him when you don’t even know him?’

‘I might not know all the petty details about his life, but I *do* know him. I know him in a realer way, not just the boring details. I can’t explain it, Alice, but there’s just this connection between us. It sounds so bloody sordid because it’s an affair, but the essence of it isn’t sordid. And before you carry on lecturing me, I promise you can’t make me feel any worse about it than I’ve made myself feel.’

‘Of course you have, because this isn’t you. You’re way too good for this. You’re – you’re my sister.’

And I realize that she’s going through a much-magnified version of the shock I experienced when I discovered that she loves beetroot, even though I think it’s the devil’s vegetable. Or that she has a strange, unwarranted crush on Martin Shaw, even though he’s about 105. There’s a nonsensical part of me that believes that because she’s my twin, because we were once one entity, she’ll feel just the same as me about almost anything. When we disagree on something significant I feel like the ground has shifted, like I’m utterly alone. Where is that comforting reflection that tells me I’m OK in the world?

‘Alice, I know how wrong it is, how illogical, and that is exactly why I’ve ended it. You don’t have to worry about it any more. The job’s nearly finished, the affair’s over, life’s back to normal.’

‘Do you absolutely promise? Do you swear on Pablo’s grave?’

Pablo was the lop-eared rabbit that Dad got us a few months after Mum had died. We became obsessed with him, saving all our pocket money to get him elaborate accessories for his hutch and carving up carrots into alluring shapes. Swearing on his life became the biggest guarantee of truth and, after his death, invoking his grave took on the same solemnity. It’s something we’ve long since left behind and tells me at a stroke how disturbed and frightened Alice actually is.

‘I swear on his ears and whiskers,’ I say, kissing her on the cheek. ‘Do you want to sleep in here tonight?’

‘No, you snore and you kick.’

‘Yeah, and you talk and dribble,’ I shoot back.

Alice gives me a hug and then swings out of bed. She gives me a long look when she reaches the door, weighing it all up. ‘Night, fat face,’ she says, finally leaving. I can’t bear to lie here going over it: whatever Alice needs to believe, it’s not so easy to reduce and dismiss. Rather than getting caught in a mental rat-run, I need to focus my energies on quarantining my feelings until they’re no longer infectious. Bad analogy. I go to sleep and dream in Victoriana: dilapidated hospitals filled with handsome consumptives, women in crinolines that rip to shreds when they brush past their beds. I wake up hung-over and badly rested, forcing myself to push round the Hoover even though it sounds to my sore

head like a herd of elephants. I let Alice sleep in till eleven, feeling like it's the least I can do. She finally emerges, yawning.

'Morning, little one,' she says. 'Shall I do toasties?'

I breathe a sigh of relief that she's chosen normality over a continued state of emergency. 'Mmm, let's try one with peanut butter and banana.'

'That's disgusting! You can't put sweet things in a toastie. Cheese and tomato is my final offer.'

'It's your only offer.'

'Same difference.'

We bicker on companionably as we pack and clean, setting off for London around midday. As I'm squashing my case into the Peugeot's tiny boot, I take a moment to look back at the house, thinking how little I knew of what was to come when I first laid eyes on it. These seven days feel more like seven months, so packed were they with emotional highs and lows.

We steer well clear of the elephant in the car till we're about halfway home.

'We need to just get out there more,' says Alice. 'Try out different stomping grounds.'

'I don't know if I'm ready…'

'No arguments, you need to MAKE yourself ready. You can't start pining for him, Lulu. You'll realize how bloody unreal it all was as soon as you get a proper boyfriend again.'

'What, like Richard?' I snap before I can help myself.

‘At least he’s not…’ Alice stops herself, but can’t hold back. ‘What did he tell you about his marriage? How’d he justify what he’s doing?’

‘That he loves her, but that it’s not… right. Please don’t ask me for gory details, not when you’re friends with her.’

‘Yeah, and I’m twins with you.’

There’s a loaded silence, which I eventually break.

‘I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you. I just didn’t want you to worry.’

‘Whatever,’ says Alice tersely. ‘What has he actually said to you? Cos it doesn’t sound anything like what Bea describes.’

‘You’ve known her for what, four days?’

‘It’s long enough to get a pretty clear sense she’s happy. She talks about him all the time. I know it’s hard to hear, but you need to trust me on this.’ She continues more gently. ‘He’s spinning you a line – surely you must see that?’

I stare out at the road, raking over the clues from last night like Hercule Poirot. The most overwhelming sense I got was of a woman in control. Charles’s easy charm was muted and suppressed: was that just the awkwardness of the situation, or does Bea have his balls in a bag? Anyway, trying to work out if he’s played me for a fool is more about my ego than anything else. The relationship’s over – there’s no point having a full-scale row with the person I love most in the world about where the truth lies.

‘And why wouldn’t he?’ she continues. ‘You’re incredible and you deserve someone who’s actually worthy of you.’

‘Thanks,’ I say. I know she means it, but right now it’s not touching the sides.

‘And when you meet him, you’ll know this wasn’t love. It can’t be _’

‘Alice,’ I snap through gritted teeth, and then swallow down the rage that’s threatening to erupt. I’m suddenly struck by the realization that she’s never been in love, not like this. We’ve thought we’ve had it, but I know now that none of my past relationships have had this sense of connection, of mutual adoration. I don’t believe for a second she’s got it with Richard, and without ever having experienced it, how could she begin to understand? I’m thinking about trying to explain some of this, when my phone beeps. Grateful for the distraction, I scrabble around my handbag and pull it out: it’s Ali!

> Morning, Pinocchio, what you up to? You do not have to reply, but anything you do reply may be taken down and used in evidence against you.

It makes me giggle, which means I have to read it out to Alice, with predictable results.

‘For God’s sake, give him another whirl,’ she pleads. ‘What have you got to lose?’

‘He hasn’t even asked me out!’

‘He’s clearly still interested or else he wouldn’t be bothering to text. He’s a gem, Lulu, a total gem.’

‘I know he is and that’s why… that’s why I can’t go near it unless I’m sure I mean it.’ I think of how gutted he looked when he

described his perfidious ex, then check my heart's temperature. Yes, Charles fever is still virulent and until that changes I'm damaged goods. I try to explain all of that to Alice, but she's not impressed.

'A man like that's not gonna hang around. Please don't let him slip through your fingers.'

'Even if he wanted to go on a date with me, I just think we're too different. He's very… very straight.'

'What does that mean?'

I think about it, struggling to articulate what it is that worried me.

'Everything's so, so bloody simple in his world.'

'Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe everything doesn't need to be as complicated as it is in yours.'

I stare out of the window, watching the cars zip by in the other lane. Infuriating though Alice's sense of certitude is, there's so much I'm grateful for. I'm so glad not to be driving with this hangover, so glad that she's alongside me with her bagful of opinions about what will make me happy.

'I'll think about it, Alice, I promise. And if I say we'll go out on some stupid bar crawl down Upper Street next weekend and make come-hither eyes at estate agents, will you get off my back?'

'Yes,' agrees Alice.

I send Ali a text in reply.

Am still on the loose, driving back from Yorkshire. Hope all good with you.

Friendly, but not dishonestly flirtatious. Part of me wants to flirt, at least a little bit, and a few quips about the most-wanted list flit through my mind, but I can't bear to risk causing hurt. Not when I've potentially caused so much hurt already. I turn my attentions back to Alice.

'I do know what you're saying, and straight back at you as far as Richard goes. As soon as you meet a man whose pointy slippers don't curl up at the ends when he's in a rage you'll know what a lucky escape you've had.'

She laughs in a way that sounds reassuringly genuine and I say a silent prayer he's history. One thing's for certain, it's gotta be onward and upward for the Godwin twins and, horrible though it's been, I'm glad to have got my secret off my chest. Let's hope Alice won't bear a grudge about how long I kept it hidden there.

Perhaps if I knew a little more history myself, I'd have the perfect solution to the wedding crisis. When Tuesday arrives I'm beyond grateful that I'm going to be able to call on Zelda's Yoda power to find a way through. But what I'm really excited about is the chance to finally see her: in the ten years I've known her, we've never gone this long. She throws opens the door, wearing the emerald green velvet turban, and gives me a theatrical kiss on each cheek.

'Darling girl, there's just time for a cup of coffee before we leave.'

'Where for? The V&A? British Library?'

'No, somewhere far, far colder. The zoo.'

As I gingerly sip on insanely strong coffee, Zelda explains her logic. She insists that sometimes you have to be inspired by something tangential, think about designing from a different angle. After all, she says, 'Who designs coats better than leopards?' I try to get to the bottom of her health situation, but she's typically dismissive.

'I'm on the home straight now, there's nothing for you to fret about. It's naughty of me to stay in the background, but I wanted you to see that you could jolly well cope, which you clearly can. Where are they today anyway?'

Thank God she's all right. She looks pinker and plumper (not that I'd risk saying that out loud), and she's dipping a chocolate croissant into her tar-like coffee with huge relish. I know I need to dig deeper, but for now I just want to enjoy having her back with me. Anyway, she seems so chipper and positive that the last thing I want to do is rain on her parade.

'They're just doing studio stuff today. Gareth's got it under control.'

'And you don't mind a day away?'

That's the understatement of the century. It's unbearably painful to stay away from Charles, but I know it's my only hope. He, meanwhile, is desperate to talk, and is plaguing me with texts imploring me to at least give him the chance to apologize for Friday. I've sent him a single text back telling him I need some space, but it hasn't stemmed the tide, and of course part of me is mightily relieved that it hasn't. It's so schizophrenic this state of mind; it's

almost as though my twin is an evil one that lives within me, tempting me towards the dark side. I'm clinging on doggedly to the certitude that no good can come of it and hoping that my feelings will eventually abate.

Fortunately, Tarquin kept me stranded in his caravan for much of yesterday, wanging on about his tedious 'vision', so it was reasonably easy to keep out of Charles's airspace. Less fortunately, I've agreed to have dinner with him to give him a chance to expand on his genius in a more convivial environment. I did at least elicit a promise that he'd show me episode one, leaving me praying that Suzanne honours her agreement to cough up more cash in exchange.

Zelda insists I drive, even though she won't ordinarily risk so much as five minutes with me behind the wheel. The zoo is almost deserted, what with it being term time in the depths of winter, and I can't help wondering why we're bucking the trend, but Zelda strides off towards the elephants with huge purpose.

'So are you thinking the wedding dress should be in a sort of thick, muddy hide?' I ask her. 'I reckon Emily would really like that.'

'Don't be facetious, Lulu! Just stop talking and consider them properly.'

I do as she asks, zeroing in on a mother with an unbearably cute and playful calf. She stands looking out over the park as her little one frolics in the background, splashing around in the puddles and chomping down roughage. Every now and then she turns round and

clocks him, eventually lumbering over to hoover water up her trunk and wash him down. If it wasn't so cold I could watch them all day.

'They're lovely together, aren't they?'

'They are,' agrees Zelda. 'There's something intensely wise about elephants. I think that's why they live to such a ripe old age.'

It's lucky Zelda's not a zoologist, but I kind of know what she means. That elephant looks like it knows more about life than any four-legged creature could possibly be expected to.

'I remember I was doing some ghastly safari romance out in Kenya. It was after *Out of Africa*,' she continues, 'when everyone thought that the mere sight of a cheetah equalled box-office gold. The second lead was like a Greek god, but so stupid he'd probably have eaten his own shit. Anyway, he was desperate to get into my knickers, and I have to admit I was sorely tempted.'

'Was this before you met Michael?'

'Oh no! It was a chronic case of the seven-year itch.'

Zelda unfaithful? I always assumed their marriage was as solid as a rock, kept permanently novel and exciting by the long separations.

'The lust got so out of hand that I asked one of the drivers to take me out on safari on our day off, in a vain attempt to keep my virtue intact. We ended up a few feet from a family of elephants and I found I was totally transfixed. I stared and stared at the mother till she started to seem like some kind of deity. It sounds ridiculous, but I felt like she could see into my soul. I knew then that I mustn't risk it – that even if Michael never found out, I'd always know.' She smiles wryly. 'I saw the Greek god about ten years later and he was

the size of a bloody elephant, a great big alcoholic bloater. Don't let those misogynists fool you it's only women who age badly.'

'Was it really hard for you not to act on it?' I ask her.

'Oh, pure torture. I'd lie in bed wishing he'd swing through the window and make the decision for me.'

'Were things very bad between you and Michael?'

'No, not bad. Just ordinary. We get spoiled in this business, Lulu, or at least we used to, before those philistines turned it into a form of benign slavery.' I pray she's not off on her favourite tirade, but luckily she gets back to the point. 'I travelled the world being flattered and cosseted, paid to do what I loved most. I think I started to want the spotlight to burn as brightly when I got home.'

'But was that wrong? Is it wrong to want your husband to make you feel special?'

'Lulu, the most special thing someone can do is to be aware of all the things about you that aren't particularly admirable and love you nevertheless. One doesn't want to come home and feel like one's still collecting bouquets.'

'So ordinary's good?'

'Sometimes,' says Zelda, winding her outlandish green turban around her head in a majestic fashion. 'Ordinary' is not a word I could ever associate with her, whatever she says. 'Come along, Lulu, the giraffes are calling.'

The giraffes are much more lively, wandering up to the fence inquisitively and craning their long necks towards us. A couple of

babies gambol about in the background, playing some kind of giraffe version of kiss chase.

‘They’re way less interested in the calves than those elephants,’ I say.

‘Oh, they’ve all got it right,’ replies Zelda. ‘They work out exactly how much nurture is necessary and then give them the space to make their own mistakes.’

‘So you think it’s good that the mummy giraffe isn’t ferrying them off to Suzuki violin and French immersion?’

‘A very good thing. We’re not necessarily the wisest mammals just because we’re down to two feet.’

Zelda notices that I’m currently stomping my two feet in a vain attempt to keep warm, and suggests we take shelter in the reptile house. I don’t expect to be much interested, but they’re surprisingly beautiful. Their scaly skin is broken up by vivid colours and their sudden movements constantly catch me by surprise. We get lost in there for the best part of an hour and then realize it’s long past lunchtime. Zelda wrinkles her nose dismissively at the thought of eating in the canteen, so we take off on a whistle-stop tour of the rest of the enclosures so that we can forage elsewhere for food. When we get to the polar bears I temporarily forget how hungry I am. There are just two of them ranging around the enclosure, occasionally acknowledging one another when they pass.

‘Do you think they’re friends?’ I ask Zelda.

‘Now you’re being sentimental,’ she replies, somewhat hypocritically considering she’s been canonizing the elephants.

‘They might’ve been put in there to mate.’

‘Or maybe they’re siblings,’ I opine. ‘Me and Alice used to wonder if any of Noah’s animals were twins instead of husband and wife.’

‘And why was that?’

‘Because the animals who got on the ark were the only ones who were going to be safe from the flood. So we thought that all the twins were either going to drown or get separated, which would’ve been almost as bad.’

‘And did you think the zebras had actual marriage certificates? Signed with a single hoof print, I suppose?’

‘Of course!’

‘That’s exactly why I never let the boys anywhere near Sunday school,’ says Zelda, linking her arm through mine. ‘It’s ridiculous nonsense.’

We walk back through the park to the car, skirting the side of a beautiful lake. Zelda gestures to a pair of swans gliding across the surface.

‘I’m sure they’re not twins. Swans mate for life, you know, just like elephants.’

‘Do you think they ever get tempted?’

‘Who knows, but they’re a jolly good role model for you. What’s going on with that unpredictable love life of yours now that ludicrous Steve character’s ancient history?’

‘Oh, you know…’

We’re approaching the car now and I’m playing for time.

‘No, I don’t know, otherwise I wouldn’t be asking!’

‘Very little.’ Which is kind of true, as of last week.

‘Hmm, is that the God’s honest truth?’

‘I thought you said that God was ridiculous nonsense?’

Zelda stares at me beadily, waiting for me to elaborate.

‘I’ll try and think of something when we’ve sat down for lunch. What do you fancy?’

‘I think we’ve rather missed the boat, lunch-wise,’ says Zelda and I deflate a little. I’m so enjoying being around her, and I haven’t even had time to ask her all the work questions I’ve got. ‘I’ve got a better idea,’ she continues. ‘Drive straight through the park and down Portland Place, and then I’ll tell you where next.’

The ‘where next’ is a chichi hotel, right in the centre of Mayfair. Zelda leads the way across the elegant marble lobby, making a beeline for the maître d’.

‘Zelda Marchmont?’

‘Ah, Ms Marchmont. Right this way.’

Soon we’re perched on dainty velvet chairs, poised and ready to consume our own bodyweight in champagne and scones.

‘This is amazing! Why…?’

Zelda’s not mean, but nor is she one for extravagant gestures. And, boy, is this extravagant.

‘Because I wanted to say thank you to you via the medium of finger sandwiches. Seriously, Lulu, I know this job has been far from easy. You’ve had very little support from me and yet you’ve pulled it out of the bag.’

‘Thanks, Zelda, that’s really –’

She holds up an imperious hand to stop me in mid-flow.

'I also wanted to tell you, and you know I'm not one for sentimental guff, that you've been far and away the best assistant I've had over the last thirty or so years. Not the most punctual, not always the most confident, but the most talented and the most enjoyable to work with. Now don't start blubbing or waffling, just have your tea and know that it's true.'

But I can't help myself: tears are coursing down my cheeks unbidden. I wipe my face with the starchy linen napkin and try to compose myself. Zelda watches me keenly.

'Lulu darling, what's he done to you?'

'What's who done to me?'

'Whatever rotten louse is causing the tsunami! It's not that ghastly little tyke Tarquin, is it?'

'Of course not!' I say, before realizing I've given the game away. Oh well, the secret's already loose: one more recipient makes little difference. 'It's – it's Charles Adamson and I promise you he's not a louse, whatever it looks like.'

Zelda beckons for the champagne, waving away my protestations about the car, and commences questioning me. This time confiding feels like a relief: with Alice, much as I was glad to blast away the deceit, I was way too consumed by her reaction. I tell Zelda every last scrap and for once she doesn't interrupt.

'That's a scrape and a half,' she says when I've finally run out of steam. 'Do you love him? Oh, don't bother replying, it's patently obvious.'

‘I know, and it’s a disaster and no good will come of it.’

‘Michael was married when I met him,’ says Zelda unexpectedly.

‘What?! Who to?’

‘This sweet little blonde bobbin of an actress. He was desperately unhappy; used to drive home and park outside trying to think of an excuse to turn round.’

‘So, what, you had an affair and he left?’

‘We had the very beginnings of an affair and then I walked away, told him it was his choice. I didn’t want him to leave for me, but if it came to a sticky end I was open to a discussion.’

‘How did you manage to be so cool about it?’

‘Trust me, Lulu, I didn’t feel cool. I had to have an obscene amount of obscene sex with a Neanderthal spark to distract myself. Eventually he came back.’

‘Did you know he would?’

‘Not at all, but I couldn’t take him on any other terms. I didn’t want to be a bad charm, a constant reminder of how much he’d hurt her.’

‘But there weren’t any children,’ I counter. ‘Kids change everything. How can you ever build a happy relationship on the graveyard of all that pain?’

‘Of course it’s painful, but not all marriages endure. Do bear in mind that it’s not actually the nineteenth century. To limply hang around when you don’t love your spouse is a very peculiar version of kindness.’

I take a minute to consider what she's saying. Is there a wildly unlikely turn of events where Charles and I could have a future without being deemed moral bankrupts? The last thing I want to do is rob his children of their father, but perhaps I might be a catalyst rather than a cause, for a parting that was inevitable. I tentatively posit this theory to Zelda, who waves a dismissive hand.

'Lulu, I don't want to kid you that you're going to live happily ever after with this man – it's the longest of long shots. All I'm saying is that love isn't as straightforward as people try to pretend. It's raw and it's messy and it can be hideously destructive. But it is a life force, and it's high time you found someone you feel passionate about rather than some kind of pen pal you can treat as an adjunct to that sister of yours.'

'That's not fair,' I snap, hating the implied criticism of our twinishness.

'No, of course it isn't,' she says with an infuriating smirk. 'So how about we turn our attentions to business?'

It's kind of a relief to change gear, to clamber out of the emotional maelstrom of the last few days. I give forth with my second monologue of the afternoon, laying out all my Polaroids and drawings to show her what I've been up to. I give her a lightning snapshot of all the madness and power play too.

'What's happened to me, Zelda? I've slept with a married man and used everything I've got to manipulate Tarquin and Suzanne.'

'And?'

'Since when did I become such a bitch?'

‘The pope’s a shit.’

‘Sorry?!’

‘Theory of Michael’s: whoever’s at the top of any tree has inevitably buried some bodies to get there. God knows, I’ve pulled some dirty tricks in my time. All you’ve done is learnt that power requires moral compromises… and the sex we’ve already covered.’

Is she right? How utterly dismal if she is. I often wonder if top politicians started out full of youthful promise and idealism before getting corrupted by the murky realities they’re exposed to. Or those premier league footballers having fist fights and spit roasts all over the place: was it all about the beautiful game before the prizes got too sordid and tempting? Mum was always such a stickler for right and wrong. The fridge door was dominated by a huge chart, split in two, on which we earned stars or crosses depending on our crimes and misdemeanours. Good behaviour was rewarded, bad behaviour was punished, and the universe seemed like a safe and benevolent place to be. That is until we discovered, in the cruellest possible way, that our mum was fallible. A spit roast might be pushing it, but I don’t want to accidentally morph into a person who no longer knows what the rules are.

Zelda’s highly complimentary of my ball gowns, which is a fat lot of use now they’ve got about one minute of screen time. When I tell her how much money’s left in the budget for the wedding, she actually guffaws.

‘I’m sorry, Lulu, it’s not funny at all. It’s just you’ve made the classic error of consistently delivering. Now they think you’re a

miracle worker, of course.'

'What about if you talked to Timothy Le Grande? I was hoping I could do a deal with Angels on a job lot of frocks till I found out he'd swiped them all.'

Zelda's lost in a coughing fit, but when she recovers she shoots me down in flames.

'He doesn't believe anyone else in the business remotely measures up and he'd have nil respect for the kind of low-rent nonsense we're engaged with. I can't face demeaning myself for no purpose.'

So that's that. I wait, poised, expecting Zelda to come up with an alternative plan. Surely she can have her all too familiar budget battle with Suzanne? It happens once every production, in far less straitened circumstances than this, and Zelda always emerges from the ring triumphant. But when I suggest it she shoots me down again, insisting that I've got the solution myself if I trust myself.

'This isn't a game, Zelda! Just tell me what I should do. I've tried so bloody hard on this job, it's not that much to ask.'

I hate the whiny tone I can hear coming through, but I'm beyond frustrated. I know she knows what the answer is: why won't she tell me? She just sits there, dabbing a scone with blobs of cream and jam as though it's a canvas. As she finally raises it to her lips, an idea suddenly strikes me.

'How about if we didn't compromise on the costumes, and we just shot fewer people?'

'Expand.'

‘If I could get Tarquin to believe the problem’s genuine, but that he can get the look he wants anyway, perhaps he’ll work with me. We could use way fewer extras, which would save a fortune. We throw our firepower at some of the key cast then shoot the others more in the background, with the odd close-up and quick pan across so we don’t need anything too elaborate. I reckon I could take about three thousand out like that.’

‘Brilliant!’

‘So why didn’t you just suggest it an hour ago?’

‘Because I hadn’t thought of it.’

‘Really?’

‘Really. You’re no slouch, Lulu, if only you’d realize. Now I’ve ordered the bill: I hope you’ve sobered up sufficiently to drive me home.’

Zelda’s sage-like silence wears off on the way home. She gives me various brilliant tips for how I can dress the extras cheaply and what colours and fabrics will look the most expensive on camera. I assume she’ll have had quite enough of me, but she invites me in, taking me down to her and Michael’s pseudo cinema, a projector that they have rigged up in the basement. ‘I thought you could do with some non-furry inspiration,’ she says, digging out a stack of DVDs. And what inspiration! We watch wedding after wedding: ‘Pride and Prejudice’, all four weddings from *Four Weddings*, *The Graduate* and, my absolute favourite, *The Philadelphia Story*. By the time that’s finished, I’m awash.

‘Why aren’t real men like Cary Grant?’ I ask her, wiping my eyes.

‘Do you *know* anything about Cary Grant?’ she says.

‘Don’t burst my bubble. Let’s have the next one.’

We’ve hit the trashier end of the market now. Their library covers all bases, so we romp through *Runaway Bride*, *27 Dresses*…
Eventually I start to feel like I’ve eaten way too much cake, maybe because I’ve eaten way too much cake. It’s also an overdose of sugar-coated sentiment. Partly I’m nauseated, partly I’m heartsick. I want to want this. Hell, I do want this – I just wish I had the right to want it with the person I’m pining for.

Zelda starts getting twitchy around seven and I sense it’s time for me to drag myself away. Unusually, Michael and the kids are all due home, and the last thing I want to do is intrude. I give her a huge hug on the doorstep.

‘Thank you so much for today. It’s been amazing.’

‘It was fun, wasn’t it?’ she says, smiling in a dimply way that tells me she means it.

‘Promise me you’re not going to go back into hibernation. Sorry, Zelda, that sounds really selfish, but now you’re feeling better…’

‘I won’t, Lulu darling, I won’t.’

‘And I’m sorry I didn’t ask you more. It’s not because I don’t care, but you know that, don’t you?’

‘Enough! Today wasn’t about cancer and all the better for it. Now run to your car, it’s freezing.’

I do her bidding, as per, stopping to wave as I get in. Today’s been one of the happiest times I’ve had in ages, and yet I find the ridiculous tears are rising up through me yet again. I’m swollen up

with emotion, all kinds of versions of love – real and imaginary – swirling around inside me. Driving through Oval, I force myself to grip up, remembering how close I came to a drink-driving rap back in January. Well, quite close, if Ali hadn't been the nicest policeman you could possibly be stopped by. And quite possibly the cutest.

I pull up outside our squat little house about eight, noticing that all the lights are off. Of course, Alice is on counselling duty with Jenna, who's suffered yet another brutal break-up – let's hope the pub doesn't run out of wine before she's finished. I slam the door of the car, slightly spooked by a car that's parked at the end of the path with a light on. I hurry towards the door, digging my keys out of my bag as I go.

'Lulu.'

Oh my God: it's Charles.

Chapter Sixteen

A bolt of shock runs through me. Have I conjured him up by directing so much mental energy in his direction?

'What are you doing here?'

'I found your address on the unit list. Thank God it's you,' he says with a sheepish grin. 'I'm sure I'm the last person your sister would want to see on the doorstep.'

I'm consumed by equal measures of love and rage. Of course, part of me's thrilled he's here, but I'm also furious that he's dragging out a situation which is almost certainly hopeless. I'm not going to be some chew toy that he intermittently uses to distract himself from the nagging pain of love gone sour.

'What makes you think you're not the last person *I* want to see on the doorstep?'

At which point he grabs me, gathering us up into an enormous snog. I melt, of course I do, but then I yank myself out of his encircling arms.

'Don't *do* that!'

'I'm sorry, Lulu, it's a Pavlovian response to your general gorgeousness. But you're right, I shouldn't.' I glower at him, trying

to hate him and failing dismally. ‘Can I please have five minutes with you in the warm? I promise you can kick me out after that.’

I jerk my head towards the door, unlocking it. He follows me through to the kitchen.

‘Cup of tea? Glass of wine? Orange squash?’ I ask sarcastically.

He’s fiddling with his phone, shifting from foot to foot. There’s a real nervous tension there, which is making me feel even more stressed than I would anyway.

‘Squash sounds delightful,’ he replies, ‘but if you’ve got some wine open I’ll go with that.’

I pour a couple of glasses, then head for the living room. If Alice comes back, I’m a dead woman walking: thank God Jenna’s monologues last a minimum of twelve hours. I need to keep my defences up at all costs (a strategy that’s gone well thus far, I’m sure you’ll agree).

‘What do you actually want, Charles?’ He goes to speak, but I tumble on. ‘I know, I know, you want to talk. But what’s there to talk about? It’s done, it’s gruesomely painful, but it’s done.’

Of course, part of me hopes it isn’t, but I have absolutely no right to ask for the near impossible. Charles puts a hand out towards me.

‘Lulu, Lulu, I know. It’s complete torture for me too and I’m desperately sorry for how thoughtless I’ve been. I should never have put you in this position.’

‘Oh, save it. The best thing you can do now is – is…’ I find myself leaning towards his open arms, desperate for comfort. He reaches

out, holding my wet face against his chest. ‘The best thing you can do is give me some space to try and get over you.’

‘I know, I know I should,’ he whispers into my hair. ‘But I can’t seem to manage it. I can’t stop thinking about being with you, having you in my life properly.’

I freeze, flooded with excitement for the brief second before I remember the devastating implications.

‘You hardly know me, Charles.’ I can’t look at him. If I look at him he’ll be able to read how I really feel in a heartbeat.

‘That’s not true, you know it’s not.’

‘Don’t start talking like that if you don’t mean it. And you can’t mean it, you can’t.’

‘But I do mean it. I’m… I’m very, very fond of you, Lulu.’

‘The three little words every girl longs to hear.’

‘What?’

‘Very, very fond,’ I snap, a hint of challenge in my tone.

He looks at me intensely, a smile playing around his lips. ‘Obviously I’m speaking in code,’ he says, turning my face upward and kissing me deeply. This time I don’t even make an attempt at pushing him away. We lose minutes to that kiss – a kiss that, like this relationship, should never have started. It blocks out all the pointless mental wrangling that will inevitably begin once the world’s no longer concertinaed down to nothing more than the warm exploration of each other’s mouths. But when he slips a questing hand under my jumper, I jerk away.

‘Don’t, just don’t. I don’t know what’s going on here, but what I do know is that I can’t carry on sleeping with someone else’s husband. It’s too hideous.’

‘You’re right, darling, of course you’re right. I’m so glad you’re my conscience.’

‘And she’s lovely, Bea…’

‘You’re right about that too. She’s a lovely woman, she’s just not the right woman for me.’

He reaches out to cup my face just as I spot Alice’s white Clio veering past the window. There can’t be any parking spots at this end of the road, giving me about ninety seconds’ grace to smuggle him out of the house.

‘It’s Alice! You’ve got to go out the back.’

I race into the kitchen, finding the keys for the garden gate. I lock and slam the back door, seeing Alice’s outline coming up the front path as I do it. I grab his hand and pull him down the alleyway which runs round the back of the houses, adrenaline coursing through my veins. We emerge at the end of the street, yards away from his bashed-up Land Rover.

‘Jesus!’ says Charles, panting as he holds the door open for me. ‘I’m really not up to this.’

‘Me neither,’ I say, sliding into the passenger seat. And then I take a deep breath and give him a version of the speech that Zelda must’ve given Michael all those years ago. I tell him how I can’t be responsible for taking a father from his children – how no one would ever forgive us, least of all me – but that if he genuinely feels

his marriage might end then we can talk about it once there's water under the bridge. I tell him that it mustn't be a choice between me and his family: that all he can do is take me out of the equation and see how the cards fall.

'Will you stop being so right all the time? Besides, there are no equations left in my life that don't involve you. Even stupid ones like whether to have a cup of coffee in the morning: I find I just don't want it, because the only way I can imagine enjoying it is if I were on some sun-drenched balcony sipping it with you.'

I grin at him dopily, too frightened to fall off the edge. No one's ever loved me like this; why does it have to be that the one person who does love me like this is the one person I can't have? I go for a kiss instead of a cogent thought, which is how we come to crush Theo's sheep. It's that nasal, plasticky rendition of 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' which brings me down to earth with a bump.

After I've scrambled out of the car, I briefly lean back in.

'I mean it, Charles, we can't do this. The only honourable thing to do is stay away from each other. It's too big a decision to make in the heat of all of this.'

'I completely agree,' he says soberly. 'I need to go away and think.'

'This has got to be goodbye,' I say, my eyes filling with hot tears, 'at least for now.'

I slam the door and shakily walk away. I make two circuits round the block, barely conscious of the drizzly rain that's soaking me. So many competing emotions are swirling around. If I were utterly

ruthless in my pursuit of him, would I be best to doggedly hang on, chipping away at the marriage day by day? But to get him on those terms would be an empty, sordid victory. I do want him – I can't deny it – but not at any cost. This is my sole chance: it's a high-risk strategy, but it's the only one that offers any hope of us having a life together that I could bear to inhabit.

I know I'm going to be vulnerable to interrogation, so I stop at Costcutter for an alibi pint of milk, cursing the fact that I'm once again lying to Alice. At least it's a brief slip off the wagon, not a full-scale recommencement of operations. I childishly cross the fingers of my left hand behind my back as I trot out my ludicrous excuse.

'But you're soaking!' she says incredulously. 'Did they actually make you milk the cow on the open prairies?'

Luckily the rain's disguised my tears: it's all mingled into one big mascara-y mess. 'Nooo! It's just really rainy. How was Jenna anyway? And why the hell were you driving? Surely you needed at least a bottle to yourself to drown out the tragedy?'

'Don't be mean!' says Alice. 'She's on a detox, so we had smoothies.'

'Where'd you go for smoothies till ten o'clock?'

'And dinner as well. Some vegetarian place on Parkway.'

'What'd you have?' I say, happy to change the subject.

'Um, just some kind of vegetable sludge. Anyway, the last thing you need to hear is Jenna's catalogue of woe. I want to tell you about Friday.'

Alice has gone into organization overdrive, inviting a whole gang of our mutual friends as well as Rufus and Dinah. As she's rattling through the agenda, I spot Charles's woolly beanie, lying half under the sofa. Jaw rigid, I sidle over and perch awkwardly on the arm, giving myself just enough purchase to kick it out of sight. I hate being such a sneaky, horrible liar. At least now I've sent Charles away I can rediscover some kind of integrity and stop living life like a double agent tasked with international espionage's most frivolous mission.

The wedding crisis means I've got a watertight excuse to stay away from set. I get Gareth to look after front of house, while I get the team working on running up frocks for all the extras. I'm terrified of how my spin on it will go down with Tarquin, but he's remarkably receptive.

'We could have a sort of bleached-out background, lots of neutrals. That way our key characters can sing out against the austerity in really vibrant colours. They'll be like diamonds in the rough.'

Listening to the ridiculous nonsense spewing from my mouth, I realize that I'm trying to manipulate Tarquin with mimicry. Clearly my Russian paymasters have given me a new mission even more ludicrous than the last.

'Credit crunch chic! Very now, Lulu, very modern. Emily'll be like the pearl in the oyster.'

'Exactly.'

‘Oysters,’ he muses, a faraway look in his eye. ‘Do you like oysters?’

‘Erm, I find them a bit slippery, if I’m honest.’ Not that I ever am honest these days.

‘You haven’t had a good one; once you do you’ll never go back. That’s what we’ll do for our night out.’

What – make eyes at each other over slimy molluscs while considering Tarquin’s genius? I should quit complaining: the fact that he’s bought into my plan is a total miracle. Spurred on, I set to work on designing Emily’s wedding dress, briefly toying with some kind of tit-covering polo-neck arrangement to revenge myself for the whole Big Bird incident. Tarquin’s obviously told her what’s afoot, as she comes rushing to the production office to hear more.

‘Promise you’ll make me look like a princess!’ she implores.

A princess, that sounds about right.

‘I promise.’

‘And promise you and Alison will invite me on another girls’ night?’

‘Alice? Yes, of course we will,’ I say, telling the four hundredth lie of the last twenty-four hours.

‘Ooh, I’m excited!’ she squeals. ‘Adios Walford, hello BAFTAs.’ She sniggers. ‘Shouldn’t tempt fate, should I?’

Has she actually read the scripts? It’s more likely *Big Momma’s House 5* will get a BAFTA than ‘Last Carriage to Avon’. But then, what do I know? Perhaps I’ll be eating my words once Tarquin’s given me a look at episode one.

I don't see much of Alice the rest of the week. Post Richard, she seems to be launching herself into a social whirlwind, while all I want to do is curl up on the sofa and watch 'Grey's Anatomy'. I'm longing to speak to Charles, desperate to know where his musings have taken him, but I'm determined to find the moral backbone that has failed me thus far. Perhaps it's the tonic I need. By Friday I do feel more like my old self, a week's hard work behind me, and no more lying to my sister. We blare out music as we get ready, swilling back cheap Cava from trusty old Costcutter. I've missed her this week, reduced to watching the semi-final of 'America's Next Top Model' solo. I've been so absent this last couple of months, it's no wonder she's got her social life running like a well-oiled machine. I pull out outfits from her wardrobe, making suggestions.

'Thank God we haven't got Emily's bag of neon monstrosities to contend with,' I say, giggling.

'No, she's meeting us there,' says Alice blithely.

'What do you mean, she's meeting us there?'

'She texted me and said you'd invited her out with us. So I just told her to meet us at Los Nachos.'

Why is Emily so desperate to colonize us? After our wardrobe conflab she sent a twisted version of our conversation to Alice – who's still distinctly star-struck – and managed to score an invite.

'She's sweet, Lulu, and she really likes you,' justifies Alice.

I sound like the world's biggest meanie, but Alice doesn't have to endure Emily's monologues about her myriad talents on an almost daily basis. I warn her how much hassle we're going to get from

strangers, but I can tell she's oddly titillated by the idea of being out with a bona fide celebrity, however low rent. When we get to the bar she scours it, looking positively crestfallen that there's no sign of her. Instead there are a couple of her teacher mates and Rufus and Dinah, who's primly sipping a glass of white wine.

'Can I get you another drink?' I ask her.

'Thank you, Lulu, but it only comes by the bottle. Couldn't quite face the house. Feel free to have some,' she says, waving a dainty hand at Rufus to retrieve it from the ice bucket. He pours me some, muttering proudly, 'It's our ten-week anniversary: double figures!'

'Well done,' I whisper back, endeared by the thought that he's only ever managed a ten-week relationship with an Xbox game prior to this. Then I remember that I've got no room to patronize anyone, the state my love life's in.

Jenna's next through the door, looking ridiculously glammed up for an Islington Tex Mex joint.

'I haven't seen you for weeks!' she says, effusively hugging me. This is Jenna's curse: she's fundamentally a good egg, but is blighted by her bottomless neediness. She never has a problem getting a date, but keeping them on the hook once they've spotted her Achilles heel is another story. I can see she's on a mission, as she insists on a round of tequilas, brooking no argument when I tell her that they make me want to projectile vomit.

'I thought you were on a detox?' I ask her.

'No!'

'But, Alice…'

‘Lulu, just slam your drink,’ she demands, and I soon find myself hanging on to the bar for support, hazy and queasy in equal measure. Can that really be Ali coming through the door or is it simply a tequila sunrise? Nope, it’s him all right. He strides over confidently, way more dressed down than I’ve ever seen him. His jeans are rough and worn-in, and a tight black T-shirt emphasizes defined muscles. It’s no wonder that Jenna’s visibly preening.

‘Hello, handsome!’ she says shamelessly.

‘Hi,’ he says, extending a hand, before turning to me and casting me a look. ‘I answer C.’

‘Erm, C?’

‘To your question.’

‘Question?’ I ask, totally flummoxed.

‘A – Do you want to never see me again because you think I’m a witch? B – Do you never want to see me again cos you’ve fallen in love with a crim? Or C – Do you want to see me one more time to give me a final chance to prove I’m worthy?’

I’m staring at him, my eyes flicking round the room murderously for my treacherous, interfering sister. ‘Oh, my email,’ I say slowly, playing for time. She must’ve hacked my hotmail: Pablo was way too easy a password. It obviously wasn’t Emily she was scouting the bar for, and now, job done, you can’t see her for dust. Ali unexpectedly leans in, pushing my hair back from my ear.

‘Actually, I choose D.’

‘D?’ I squeak, thrown by the unexpected physical contact. ‘What was D?’

‘D’s my invention. I want to see you again so I can find out what colour knickers you’re wearing.’

I pull back. ‘You’re not allowed to say that.’

‘Who says?’ he counters.

‘*I* say.’

‘I think we’ve already established that anything *you* say is not to be trusted. What are you drinking? White wine or something stronger?’

‘Margarita, no salt, straight up.’

‘Think I’ll join you.’

Jenna’s been studying our exchange, eyes fixed on Ali. Sensing an opening, she jumps right in.

‘Could I trouble you for a teensy weensy drink too? Next one’s on me.’

‘Sure – margarita?’

She gives a coquettish smile of assent, before pinning me to the bar to demand to know who he is. I give her a rundown of events up to this point.

‘So he’s available? You’re not interested?’ asks Jenna keenly. ‘Shall I slow down on the tequila and work on my seduction strategy?’

‘I thought you were on a detox?’ I ask, unreasonably riled by her predatory behaviour.

‘Why do you keep saying that?’

I remind her about Tuesday night’s vegetable sludge and smoothies, but she looks completely blank. ‘I haven’t been out with

Alice since the start of half term, when we watched *He's Just Not That Into You*.'

But before I have a chance to ask more, Ali's back with the drinks. His margarita's salted, but it doesn't seem to put him off. He swallows it in a few glugs, setting his glass down on the bar. Good intentions out the window, Jenna tries to match him, then elbows her way into the fray to get another round.

'I thought you weren't much of a drinker?' I ask Ali.

'No, I'm just not much of a drink driver. Breaking the law's kind of a sacking offence.'

'Yeah, I can see that.'

He looks down at me, assessing me in a way that's making me – making me what? Uncomfortable, I guess, but also oddly keyed up. Before I've got time to kick him into touch, my meddling minx of a sister appears with Emily in tow. 'Hi, Ali!' she says, bold as brass. I try to pinch her arm, but she turns it into a friendly squeeze. It reminds me that her intentions are good – I know she just wants me to be happy – but her methods are downright infuriating.

'Woo,' shouts Emily, chinking glasses. 'The girls are out on the rampage!'

Jenna's back now, heartily drinking to that, and batting her eyelashes at Ali. Rufus and Dinah have stopped spooning in the corner and the other girls that Alice invited have also tipped up. In doing my social duty I get separated from Ali, which is probably for the best. Anyway, Jenna's more than happy to regale him with dispatches from the sandpit. Maybe that's exactly what he wants to

hear about: they both do proper, useful jobs which don't involve negotiating a cash discount for a bulk buy of buttons.

I eventually manage to get Alice on her own, telling her in no uncertain terms that she's got no right to hack my email. She refuses to take me seriously and the fact that we've both consumed a Mexican warlord's annual quota of tequila is not helping matters.

'Lulu, have you actually gone blind? He's gorgeous. Look what sexy hands he's got.'

'Hands?!'

'They're strong, they're large, they're muscular. It can only bode well.'

'In case you hadn't noticed, we're not buying a horse.'

'I'd love a horse, shall we get a horse? We could keep him in the back garden and call him Pablo the Second.'

'Alice, shut up, I'm really cross with you. And I know you weren't with Jenna on Tuesday by the way.'

She gives a mysterious smile and tries to tap her nose, but misses it.

'You were with Richard, weren't you?'

'Might've been.'

'Oh God, please don't do this to yourself, I can't bear it! And why did you lie to me?'

Yes, I know I'm a hypocrite, but who knew how horrible it would feel to be on the receiving end of my twin telling an untruth? Alice rolls her eyes and wobbles towards Emily, who's bearing down on us from the other side of the room. It's taking her a while, as the

sight of an ‘EastEnders’ star in an Islington bar is causing an unwarranted degree of excitement. She started out revelling in the number of people asking her to sign autographs and pose for phone pictures, but I can see from her body language that it’s starting to grate. She pushes past a couple more with barely a smile and finally reaches us.

‘Let’s go and dance!’ shrieks Alice. ‘You can shake your boobies at Ali.’

What a repellent image. I look over to him, but he’s deep in conversation with Jenna. She keeps clamping and unclamping her hand from around his biceps and giving little shakes of the head which make her curls bounce. She’s looking good tonight, no doubt about it, and she’s working it shamelessly. Good for her. Good for him. Oh good. I decide to go to the loo: I’m not entirely sure I need a pee, but the idea of a moment’s peace feels oddly appealing. I cross back past Ali and Jenna en route, but I’m not sure they even see me. As I’m queuing I wonder momentarily what Charles is up to right now, what he would think if he could see me. He’s probably reading *Thomas the Tank Engine* to Theo and Max, anticipating his first and last glass of wine of the evening. I swallow down a tequila burp, thinking how entirely different our lives are. Could they ever fit together with any degree of surety? I sit on the seat for a bit, wallowing in pointless drunken reflection until someone even drunker than me raps on the door and demands I hurry up. I touch up my make-up at the mirror, casting a sly eye around the crowded bathroom. All the girls are so dressed up, so eager to please the man

they're with or lure one in. Do men have that same aching need that we do, that incessant longing for connection and validation? I'm reminded of what Zelda said about how important it is to be appreciated for the real you, not the primped and powdered Friday-night version. How great would it be if Charles's story was a completely different one, if loving him was a simple contract in which I could warm myself in the glow of his gaze? Enough. I give myself a shiny red mouth like an old-fashioned postbox, then squeeze myself back out into the fray.

The corridor's packed and yet Ali's somehow managing to muscle his way through the crowds towards me.

'Hi,' I say, 'the loos are just down the stairs.'

'Not my priority.'

'What is your priority?'

'This.'

And suddenly he's kissing me, hard, right there against the wall. I think I want to stop him, but there's something addictive about how fierce and determined he is. He grips me tightly, crushes himself against me, and then pulls back. I find myself stretching back towards him, almost involuntarily, but he sets me down.

'I'll see you back out there,' he says, walking off.

'Oh, OK,' I say, thrown. If he's as desperate to see my knickers as he claims (not that I'd let him, but for the record they're some deeply unattractive mauve ones that I've been reduced to by sheer laundry laziness) he should surely stay here and work his

undeniably sexy moves. But instead he's gone, leaving me to wander towards the dance floor, dazed and confused.

Oh no. Alice's inebriation means that she's let Rufus loose. Fatal mistake. Dinah's gyrating elegantly while subtly turning her back on him. And who can blame her? Rufus dances like a mad March hare, punching his paws up above his head then forward, while making a strange skipping motion with his feet. It makes absolutely no difference what the music is, this is Rufus's dance and he will not be parted from it. What a curious party we make. While Emily attracts whispers and admiring glances, strangers are openly laughing at Rufus's moves. I can't bear that a circle's opened up around him. I jump right in there, grabbing his hand and insisting he twirls me (which doesn't work all that well with Kanye West, I can tell you). Rufus beams and we carry on strutting our sibling stuff, with absolutely no regard for dance-floor decorum. Truth be told, I'm no disco queen either and there's something peculiarly liberating about throwing myself around without shame. When Rufus requests 'Fame', it feels like the most glorious gift anyone's ever given me.

'Where's Dinah?' he pants eventually.

'Er…' Oh God, she's at the bar, sipping away at her overpriced white wine and casting us vaguely disgusted looks. And it's not just Dinah watching us. Ali's irritatingly absorbed by Jenna, but seems to be casting the odd horrified look at our car crash of a dance display. He must think I am the world's biggest idiot. But then, who knows if he's thinking about me at all, judging by how up close and personal he and Jenna look.

‘Shit, I’d better go and talk to her,’ says Rufus, looking cowed.

I cross back over to Alice and Emily, feeling vaguely foolish. Why did he kiss me like that when he blatantly fancies Jenna? Maybe all men actually are bastards and we should just get a bigger house, rope in Rufus, and accept that living in a sibling commune is all we’re good for. Who needs sex when there’s ‘America’s Next Top Model’ and a Minstrels dispenser? Although I’m not sure that Alice would go for it, not now vile Richard’s staging a reconnaissance mission (I’m still smarting about her lies, even though I’ve no right). And judging by the hugging and giggling that’s going on, Emily seems to have ejected me from the number-one spot in the girl charts too. Maybe it’s time to go home. I tell Alice I’m heading off, but she virtually pulls my arm out of its socket, begging me to stay.

‘I’m past my peak, Alice, I really am.’

‘No, you’re not! You haven’t jumped Ali yet. Tell her, Emily!’

And then the chanting begins again. It’s like they’ve formed their own demented cheerleading squad, hopelessly devoted to Team Lulu. ‘Snog Ali, snog Ali, snog Ali!’ they roar. It’s too complicated to explain that I already have. Or rather that he snogged me, but then made it blatantly clear that he had better fish to fry.

‘OK, OK. I’m going to leave, but I promise I’ll go via Ali and say goodbye. That way the ball’s in his court.’

‘Goodnight and good luck,’ slurs Alice as Emily plants a lipsticky kiss on my cheek.

I sway off the dance floor in the general direction of Ali, but I’m too late. By the time I spot him, he’s halfway out the door without

so much as a by-your-leave, arm tightly wound around Jenna. I guess revenge is a dish best served cold, with liberal amounts of tequila. I feel winded, like the stuffing's been knocked right out of me. How can I be such a bad judge of character? All that smug certainty I had that I could read his simple little soul like a book. Is he a bastard or did I just get exactly what I deserved?

Chapter Seventeen

I must've been even drunker than I realized. I wake up with make-up smeared all over the pillow and my tights still on. Even more of a surprise is the fact that Alice is in bed beside me. I'm woken up by snoring, hers or mine I cannot rightly say. My head's filled with rolling boulders and a skunk has taken up residence in my mouth. 'Uurgh,' I groan, rousing Alice. She opens one eye and half sits up, before thinking better of it and crashing back down on to the pillows. 'Never again,' we chorus.

'I honestly think Beelzebub invented tequila to lure the weak over to his evil empire,' I say, swinging out of bed to put the kettle on.

'You've got an excellent grasp of theology,' says Alice before rushing to the bathroom to vomit extravagantly.

Turns out she vacated her bed for Emily, who appears at the point when we've tottered to the sofa to suck up this week's 'Gossip Girl'. I try my best to look pleased she's invaded my living room, but it's a struggle.

'Jesus, you look like you're really feeling it,' she tells me helpfully. She's piled on so much bronzer that she's browner than George Hamilton, and enough mascara to glue her eyelashes to her

forehead with a misjudged blink. Doesn't she know that even the WAGs are rocking the natural look in these straitened times?

'Yeah, I am,' I say, through gritted teeth. 'Can we get you a coffee? Toast? What do you fancy?'

'Thanks and everything, but you look like you need to stay where you are. Anyway, think we're going out.'

I look at Alice's greenish hue and wait for her to contradict Emily. Instead she hurries to her feet, sits down again, and then struggles to standing. 'Eggs Benedict at Giraffe!' she says, causing a stream of bile to flood my windpipe.

'Are you sure?' I say, reaching for her hand.

'Most definitely,' she says brightly.

How can she possibly be contemplating food after the full-scale chundering she just undertook? She runs upstairs and pulls some jeans on, incomprehensibly keen to get out of the door. Has Emily's scant appeal not yet worn thin? There's no way I'm going anywhere, but I find myself encouraging her to invite Jenna, stupidly curious to know what happened.

'Don't worry, Lulu,' says Emily, casting a final look at my hung-over visage. 'I'm sure you'll be right as rain by Monday.'

'Are you in Monday?'

'Oh yeah, me and Charlie have got a big love scene.'

'Oh, oh good.'

'I promise I won't ask you to help me with my lines this time,' she says, smirking.

'Feel free! It's a privilege.'

‘Let’s go,’ interrupts Alice. ‘I’m starving.’

How can she possibly be hungry? I suppose she has literally emptied her stomach of its entire contents. I potter around on my own trying not to think about anything too hard. Eventually I swallow down the nausea and get back to the drawing board. My dinner with Tarquin is a mere three days away and I need to focus. I can’t allow myself to be distracted by worrying about Charles. Cautiously pleased with my efforts, I try to call Zelda to solicit her opinion, but there’s no answer from her mobile or landline. The anxiety starts to kick in, but I bat it away. She said she was on the road to recovery, and if there’s one thing I know about Zelda it’s that she’s a straight talker.

Alice comes back about three, immediately rushing up to the bathroom for a merry round of dry heaves.

‘Why’d you put yourself through that?’ I ask her incredulously.

‘Um, I like Emily. She’s a good laugh.’

There’s something insincere about her, but I don’t know quite what. ‘You weren’t just finding an excuse to get out of the house and see Richard?’

‘No!’

‘I can’t stand it if we start lying to each other,’ I plead.

‘Me neither,’ she says, a hint of steeliness to her tone. I know I’m a pot and she’s a kettle, but I’m still frustrated by how defensive she’s being. I try to probe more, but all she’ll fess up to is seeing him for a single drink.

‘I know what you think, Lulu, and I don’t wanna talk about it.’

‘But –’

She silences me with a death stare, then softens the blow by bringing me a cup of tea and a HobNob. I know better than to pry any further: I’ll have to wait until she feels ready to confide. I haven’t even had a chance yet to tell her about Jenna and Ali, but when I do she’s appalled.

‘She’s got no right!’

‘I did tell her I wasn’t interested,’ I say, even though I’m secretly glad she feels that way.

‘No matter, you saw him first!’

‘Yeah, I did, didn’t I?’

‘And you snogged him first,’ she grins broadly, ‘which is so brilliant!’

‘He snogged me. It was virtually a snog rape, except for the fact that I totally enjoyed it.’

‘I knew you would!’ says Alice, pleased with herself. ‘That’s why I invited him. You can’t let him slip through your fingers just because Jenna got her filthy mitts on him for five minutes. I love Jenna, but if we ruled out men on that basis, we might as well head straight for the nearest nunnery.’

‘No, if it was meant to be that wouldn’t have happened. He’s clearly the world’s biggest man slapper. I’m not going to think about it any more.’

‘Because you’re thinking about –’

‘No!’

Amazingly, Alice backs away from the inevitable lecture, but instead we're left with a sticky undercurrent, as we both obsess about what the other is holding back. Maybe we should've just stayed hanging out in the womb, sucking our thumbs in companionable silence with no men coming between us. If they really are from Mars, perhaps they should all just take an express rocket right back there.

Charles certainly hasn't been banished to an alternative planet. He's back in Oxfordshire, in the location where we first started, which is where I head to first thing Monday. I'm heartened to see crocuses starting to poke through the grass, heralding the arrival of spring. So much has happened since we kicked off in the freezing cold.

With only two weeks to go, I'm either going to lose him forever or something quite the opposite. My first sight of him is every bit as hard as I expected, but I do feel a certain inner poise that I've always had to fake up until now. He seems way more rattled than me, fiddling with his phone and stumbling over a simple hello. I know my position is the right one and it allows me to be professionally friendly, rather than a needy mess. I refuse to start reading too much into his behaviour; our future is out of my hands and there's a certain liberation in that.

Besides, there's way too much to deal with for me to be locking myself in the caravan, mentally rocking. But not being made of Teflon means that Tarquin's relayed request that I meet him on-set exactly when Emily and Charles are giving it their romantic all is far

from welcome. Make-up and hair are fiddling around with Emily, trying to touch up her lips while she insists on dragging on a fag between takes. Charles looks unhappy and distracted, giving me no more than a brief smile. I head determinedly in Tarquin's direction, laptop at the ready.

'Morning, gorgeous,' is his unsettling greeting.

'Um, hello,' I reply stiffly. I start taking him through my weekend's work, but he doesn't seem all that engaged.

'Tell me all about it tomorrow night,' he says. 'This scene needs to be perfect.'

'Shall I go?'

'Nah, I wanna know what you think. Grab some cans and sit over there.'

Oh, brilliant, I'll be able to hear Charles making sweet, sweet verbal love to Emily in surround sound. I catch him throwing me the odd glance, clearly disturbed by my presence. Maybe he's regretting the whole sordid business and wishing that he never had to lay eyes on me again. We're on to episode eight now: with Lady Victoria expired, Sir Percy is beginning to make tentative moves towards Bertha. Which is kind of callous if you ask me, but God knows I've got no right to judge.

'Circumstances forced me to snuff out my heart's desire, but now, perhaps…' says Charles with a soulful look. Is Emily actually chewing gum? As it's his close-up she's not obligated to do her best work, but nor is it fair to leave him with nothing to play off.

‘I can’t step into Lady Victoria’s place,’ she drawls, knowing full well it’s a cod Victorian ‘cannot’.

‘You would be doing no such thing,’ says Charles, a little unsteady. ‘The place I hold in my heart for you is yours alone.’

There’s a long pause, during which Emily looks off into the middle distance. ‘Then perhaps that place might be, might be… dunno, where is it?’ she giggles, losing the line entirely.

Charles scowls at her, then lets rip. ‘I have had it just about up to here with pretending to be in love with you. If you were the last woman on earth and the survival of the human race depended on us procreating, I still couldn’t do it. You are the most selfish creature I have ever laid eyes on and I cannot wait for the day when this purgatory is over.’

Emily’s eyes widen in shock, before she lays a theatrical hand over her mouth and hightails it to her caravan, sobbing extravagantly. It’s not that she can’t act, just that she likes to choose her moment. ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ says Charles, hands aloft, then retreats to his.

‘Do you want me to talk to her?’ I ask Tarquin, but luckily he declines, heading off after her himself. This is definitely the most exciting event since the transparent trousers and the crew immediately erupt into a full-scale post mortem.

‘Moody bugger,’ say a couple, which seems a little unfair. Make-up disagree and immediately give vent to their chronic loathing for Emily, at which point I decide to step out. I can’t face pretending to be dispassionate about Charles and I’ve got more than enough to be

getting on with today. Zelda's got a brilliant anecdote about a fist fight on the set of 'All Creatures Great and Small': perhaps I'll ring her with a newsflash.

What I won't be doing is seeking out Charles. It takes all my strength not to, but I remind myself that I want the whole picnic, not the odd mouldy sandwich. A little bit of him is worse than none of him at all. I half expect him to text me, but all I get are three messages from Alice, who's making an endearingly big fuss about cooking my favourite supper (chicken breasts swimming in pesto and mozzarella since you ask – it's not surprising I've got way more of an arse than my twin). I'm such a contradictory fool. It's good that he's taking me at my word, and yet I'm also somewhat stung that he's not reached out to me for comfort.

An hour or so later I hear they're both back on-set, but I decide to keep well out of the way. Unfortunately it makes me a sitting duck for Suzanne, who comes to ask me who was responsible for the spat. She's clearly gunning for Tarquin, but I can't bring myself to exaggerate his part in it. I can see she's frustrated by my lack of vitriol, so I find myself making ludicrous promises about what I'll ferret out over the course of our night out.

I see him in the car park on wrap and somehow expect him to psychically appreciate my magnanimous behaviour, but of course he doesn't. I ask him how he did calming Emily down, expecting an explosion, but he's oddly restrained.

'She needed a shoulder, Lulu, a port in the storm. You know how it is.'

‘Oh, OK,’ I say.

‘We all need to feel understood,’ he continues, staring at me. Is he trying to bring me on side before tomorrow’s screening? Who knows what goes on in that bizarrely crested head of his. I bid him goodnight, pretending I’m looking forward to the mollusc medley, and speed down the A40 towards home. I’m really heartened by Alice’s supper-making efforts. It feels like she’s making a space for us to talk: perhaps I’ll even pluck up the courage to tell her what I’ve said to Charles. I pick up an extra nice bottle of wine from an off-licence that’s not run by a furious fuckwit, and swing through the door with a cheery hello.

‘Hi, Lulu,’ tinkles Jenna. No. No, no, no, no. This was not meant to be my Monday night. Alice gives an apologetic smile, a strand of mozzarella hanging off her fringe.

‘Oh, hi, Jenna. Are you staying for supper?’

‘No, I’m just dropping off some books. And I wanted the chance to thank my two favourite twins for an a-m-a-a-zing night.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ I tell her, knowing full well the gory details are just down the track. I don’t want to ask, but I can’t help myself. ‘What was so amazing about it?’

‘Oh, you know,’ she says coyly.

An unjustified wave of fury washes over me. ‘Oh, do clarify,’ I say beadily.

‘A certain Scottish law enforcement officer.’

I can see that, for once, Alice is finding Jenna’s relentless man hunt as wearing as I do.

‘Yeah, that’s why I invited him along – for Lulu,’ she snaps.

Jenna’s bright pink lips make a little moue. ‘And that’s why I checked with Lulu that it was fine. And she made it crystal clear the field was open.’ She turns her large blue eyes to me and I reluctantly signal my assent. It just goes to show how little currency I have that a man who claimed to be truly obsessed could move on so spectacularly in less than an hour. I guess it’s the inverse of the Lynx effect.

‘So did you go back with him then?’ I ask through gritted teeth. Limping home in second place to Jenna was never my ideal.

‘Oh, Lulu, I don’t want to kiss and tell,’ she flutters. ‘Let’s just say that he’s very commanding.’

‘Commanding?’ hisses Alice, slitty-eyed. I love how she fights my corner, even when it’s unwarranted. I wish she’d realize that my hostility towards Richard is born of nothing else. ‘You do realize that Lulu actually –’

I put a hand out, shushing her. If Ali’s finally met someone he likes I’ve got no right to be all dog-in-the-mangerish and destroy it before it’s begun.

‘Yes, ladies, and with that intriguing titbit I shall leave you.’ Jenna’s no fool, she knows she’s best off out of Alice’s airspace. ‘Thanks again.’ She kisses us each and whirls out, right into the arms of Ali for all I know. Why am I so selfish? I should be pleased for her. She’s had nothing but wrong’uns for months, and it’s not like I wanted him. Or, at least, only a tiny bit. Maybe quite a big bit after that snog, but there we are. I bat away Alice’s outrage,

reminding her of all those salient facts, and open the wine with gusto. She swamps me with questions about my day, asking all about Emily. Why is she so obsessed? I hope she's not looking to replace Jenna as second in command. Emily is not remotely worthy, however much she intermittently turns on the charm.

'So did you talk to her after she stropped off?' she asks.

'No, no I didn't. Honestly, if I chased after her every time she has a tantrum I'd never get any work done at all. Tell me about your day, doing something that's of actual benefit to society.'

As we talk about the various staffroom politics that Alice negotiates, it occurs to me that our jobs aren't all that different, it's just that the volume level's turned up higher in mine. She admits she's having dinner with Richard this week and I force myself to smile through.

'You will press the eject button if he pulls any funny business?'

'Of course I will. He's got to prove himself to me. But it's not like there's a queue of men lining the street, is there?'

'No,' I concede, 'but if you're with him they won't have a reason to.'

She smiles at me, head cocked.

'You're wiser than you think.'

I look at her.

'I just mean you might want to take your own advice.'

She turns back to the stove and I try to quell my annoyance. There's no denying there's an element of truth in what she says, but I still wish she wouldn't set herself up as such a bastion of morality

the whole bloody time. I hate how she assumes that she's the all-seeing eye who knows better than foolish little me that my relationship with Charles is nothing more than a shaming and sordid diversion. Why doesn't she understand that love isn't straightforward; that it can grow in hostile, treacherous terrain. It's hard to defend any aspect of an adulterous relationship, but in sending him away I've tried to do something vaguely akin to the right thing. When Zelda described her own experience it felt right, but I know Alice will think I should've quashed any possibility of a future. I think about speaking up, but my desire to avoid any more disagreement feels visceral, almost like it'd be life-threatening. Instead I'll call Zelda tomorrow, using the Tarquin / Suzanne juggernaut as cover. She'll make me feel better, I know she will.

However much I might want to speak to Zelda, it seems like an impossibility. Neither phone produces a response and her interest in email has always been lacklustre at best. Gareth's not heard either and we consider driving round to her, but with so much to do, we know she wouldn't approve. We've finally got the majority of the wedding outfits made up and ready to wear, so we pull the team together to analyse what's left to be done. We get the costume assistants and office runners to try on the frocks, making all the final adjustments and snapping Polaroids.

There's a real sense of achievement in the air, particularly when I unveil Emily's wedding dress. It's not quite finished, but I'm gratified to see the collective excitement about where I'm going

with it. I've pared down the costs for all the other outfits, throwing my financial clout at what I hope is a show-stopper. It's a duck egg colour, and made from the heaviest, most luxurious satin. She'll be gratified by the amount of bosom on display, but I've given the neckline a bit more interest by cutting it square. There's beading around it, and around the cuffs, and a voluminous train, which will be carried by bridesmaids swathed in the finest polyester in the land.

'I don't want your head swelling up like a balloon, but you do seem to have worked a little bit of wardrobe magic,' whispers Gareth.

'Couldn't have done it without you or them,' I tell him.

'There was definitely a point where I didn't think you were going to pull it out of the bag. When you got all knickers and neurosis with no discernable focus.'

I try for an enigmatic smile, hoping he's not going to over-analyse what's changed. And what has changed? I guess I decided I had to be captain of my own ship, rather than a hapless passenger. A jolt of fear goes through me as I contemplate the fact I may've lost Charles in the process, but I push it aside, busying myself with pulling a couple of bottles of Prosecco out of the fridge. 'To us,' I say, toasting the team, who really have done an amazing job. After some general jollity, we pile all the frocks into the caravan and I set about repairing my make-up prior to Tarquin's arrival. It's not that I want to beautify myself in his honour, just that a five a.m. start has left me a dead ringer for Francis Rossi.

Tarquin turns up wearing a curious fawn-coloured leather jacket, which makes him look like he should be selling knock-off CDs out of the back of a Ford Escort.

'Your carriage awaits,' he says, indicating one of the unit drivers in a people carrier.

'Oh, I'm quite happy to drive,' I protest, but Tarquin is insistent. We crawl through rush-hour traffic, groping for conversation. Tarquin's unpredictability makes me nervous at the best of times, but the fact that I've got to try and charm the cut out of him makes it way worse.

'So where do you live?' I venture, then worry it sounds like I'm hoping to snuggle up there later.

'Hoxton,' he replies smugly. Of course he does. Him and all the other ludicrous 'creatives' with bird's nest hair and luminous trainers. He doesn't reciprocate with a question, but it does at least give him something to riff on. He loves the 'industrial vibe', but he feels that it's been spoiled by the Johnny-come-latelies from the city who've moved there in the last few years.

'Did you grow up round there then?' I ask innocently.

'Er, no, I'm actually from Hitchin, but it's been my patch for donkey's years.' Case closed. The restaurant fits in with his industrial vibe perfectly: it's a mixture of chrome and tiles, with a long zinc bar running down the length of it. Piercing spotlights bounce off the shiny surfaces, casting everything in a dazzling white. The cosy Italian that Ali took me to suddenly springs to mind. Will Jenna be whisked off there on his pillion, with no idea she's

following in my footsteps? An efficient but unfriendly waiter delivers us to the bar and offers us an aperitif while the table's being prepared.

'Two gin Martinis,' says Tarquin, like we're a married couple from the 1920s.

'Actually, sorry, can I just have a glass of white wine?'

'Don't be such a square,' says Tarquin in a tone that's simultaneously flirty and aggressive. 'You're a good-time girl and here we are, out having a good time.'

I laugh it off to the bemused waiter and insist on my order, but when the drinks come he's brought me both.

'Have a swig,' says Tarquin. 'If you don't like it I'll do the honours.'

Why is he so controlling? I can't bear to waste any more time talking about it, so I take the tiniest of sips, while listening to the potted highlights of his career thus far. He mainly seems to have directed pop videos for men with hair as absurd as his own, with the odd Spanish cat food commercial interspersed for variety.

'It's fantastic they gave you such a big step up,' I say once we're seated and then curse myself for implying that it sounds unwarranted. Luckily his ego doesn't allow for such suggestions.

'Damien's tracked my career right from the off; he's always been a champion of mine. He's just been waiting for the right thing. I reckon you might get your big break soon. I'm sure in a year or so you'll be ready to design something yourself.'

I quell the rage I feel that no one bar Gareth understands that this whole enormous, impossible job has fallen on my shoulders. Considering how much time I've spent interpreting Tarquin's ridiculous suggestions, I can't believe he hasn't noticed. I think the tiny sips of neat gin have proved cumulative, as I go into a massive speech about what I've put together for the wedding, determined to make him acknowledge my contribution, whatever it takes.

'Emily's dress has got this lovely pearly hem and the bridesmaids are going to be in these little purple smocks and…' Mid-monologue, I catch sight of his glazed-over expression. Oh God, who can blame him? Do I really want to sit across another dinner table being defensive and narky? Surely some of what I originally liked about him was more than just a mirage? Perhaps I need to reprogramme, try relating to him as a human being rather than as an adversary that I've got to endure and manipulate.

'What was it like, growing up in Hitchin?'

He looks a bit startled, and who can blame him? As conversational gambits go, it's not the best, but he gives it his best shot.

'Erm, I dunno. Kind of boring. But maybe that's what got me interested in directing – pretty much the only thing to do was go to the multiplex in Stevenage.'

'But do you think that growing up always involves swathes of boredom, even if you grow up in Manhattan? You're always going to have times when you're not old enough to do what you want to do.'

‘I reckon you’re the kind of girl who watches “Gossip Girl” on a Sunday morning,’ he replies with unexpected perspicacity. ‘You wouldn’t catch Blair Waldorf living it large at the Stevenage multiplex.’

And we’re off. He doesn’t miss any opportunities to remind me of his prodigious talent, but we do succeed in having a proper conversation that’s not about work. Why are we all so wedded to the armour that our careers provide? Perhaps we could all relate to just about anyone if we asked them what they felt rather than what they did. I manage to not only finish my Martini, but also consume half a bottle of wine and narrowly escape after-dinner calvados. It’s all accompanied by the aforementioned oysters, which I try, and fail, to suck elegantly from their shells.

During the slurp-athon, I discover that Tarquin’s the youngest of three brothers, which makes me slightly more sympathetic to his constant need to shout the loudest. His mockney accent seems to lessen in direct relation to the amount he drinks; not all that surprising when one discovers that said brothers are named Caspar and Atticus.

‘So what’s it like growing up a twin? Did you have really girly fights where you pulled each other’s hair and tortured each other’s Barbies?’

How many times have I answered a variation of this question? Still, I give it proper consideration.

‘There was a bit of that, I suppose. I did cut the ears off her Care Bear when she said Fran Bellamy was her best friend.’

‘All power to you.’

‘But no, it’s brilliant. Knowing there’s someone on your team, no matter what.’

‘Really?’

‘What do you mean, really?’

‘Dunno, you just sounded a bit uncertain.’

I pause, suddenly choked. Or maybe it’s just the Martini repeating on me. I try to gather my thoughts through the gin haze.

‘Maybe it’s dangerous, that’s all. Maybe you shouldn’t rely on one person being on your team because – because – what if they’re not?’

I hate myself for answering that question with any trace of ambivalence – it feels so disloyal. I guess my biggest, most indestructible shield has always been my twinhood. These last few weeks I’ve had to step out of it, at least in part, and I’m too frightened to really analyse what that means.

‘It’s great though, it’s completely great. Apart from when someone fancies both of you, like you’re cans of soup on a shelf.’

Here we go. There’s a twin schtick that I can trot out like a well-worn comic routine, complete with a smattering of witty anecdotes and wry observations. I shamelessly employ it now, knowing that I can’t explore what I’m really feeling, even if Tarquin was interested enough to go there. It gets us through to the arrival of the bill, which Tarquin puts on the production.

‘Fun though it’s been, it is a work dinner. I’ve got you well oiled in preparation for the moment of truth.’

So he hasn't forgotten then. I was considering letting the whole thing slide if he failed to mention it, even though I know in my heart of hearts I've got to go through with it. I'm silently dreading having to go to Tarquin Towers, but instead we're heading back to the unit base to watch it in the edit suite.

'Anyway, I wanna get my motor,' he says, mockney manqué in place now we've got back into a work context.

'But you can't possibly drive, neither of us can.'

'By the time we've watched it and I've got through a cafetière of coffee, I'll be the best driver on the road. I'll drop you back, prove it to you.'

We're out on the street now, where Paul, the poor unit driver, has been patiently waiting for us. Where is the engaging, amusing man I just had dinner with? He's effortlessly flicked the switch back to tosspot director without a word of warning.

'I'm not going to be getting into your car,' I snap, Alice flashing up before me. She would be utterly horrified at the thought of me in a car with a man whose stomach's like a fleshy punchbowl.

'Suit yourself,' he snaps back as we climb into the unit car. 'I'm sure Paul's quite happy to wait another couple of hours before he gets to bed, aren't you, Paul?'

'Of course I'm not going to expect you to do that. I'll get a cab.' A cab from Chertsey: brilliant. That should only be two million pounds or so. We're having one of those awful drunken rows you usually only have in the dying days of a relationship. I can distinctly remember a screaming match with Steve over a detour via a kebab

shop, but at least we were having sex – Tarquin and I have got no excuse.

He lights up one of his noxious mini cigars, puffing out of the window ostentatiously.

I want to tell him to put it out, but I'm too drunk and too stubborn to be the first to speak. Instead I bore Paul stiff with enquiries about the relative merits of automatics over manuals until there's a surly offer of chewing gum from my left. After what feels like an age, we finally arrive. Paul promises he'll wait for me, despite my protestations, and I scuttle after Tarquin towards the edit suite.

The edit suite's right at the back of the building we're based out of and is a surprisingly cosy little haven, dominated by a squidgy-looking sofa. Tarquin's mood seems to have gone through another seismic shift as he's sitting on said sofa, patting the seat next to him invitingly. He's also pouring us each another glass of wine, which I totally fail to refuse despite the fact that I'm seeing triple at least. As I'm way too drunk to be able to give Suzanne a decent analysis, it's going to be even more critical that I charm a copy out of him.

'Lights down,' he says, plunging us into pitch black. I hate the dark. I involuntarily squeal, and then feel Tarquin's hand reach for my knee. 'Nothing to fear, much to enjoy,' he says, before mercifully releasing it. I'm expecting shots of lush green fields, but instead Emily's over-made-up face fills the screen.

'What do I want?' she asks, pouting so much that her delivery's even worse than normal. 'Love, of course, pure love! For what else is

of value?'

'That's not in the script, is it?' I ask, only to have him shush me.

'It's hand-held, intimate,' he says. 'I just picked the shots up the other day. Damien's gonna love it. Cinéma vérité, my friend.'

'But she doesn't really emerge as a lead till episode two. Surely you're giving the game away? It's all about Percy and Victoria in episode one.'

'I'm not being funny, Lulu, but do you reckon Coppola's wardrobe girl gave him hints about storytelling when they were making *The Godfather*?' He waggles his finger theatrically. 'I don't think so!'

I sit there holding my tongue as the full horror unfolds. Emily's to-camera piece is followed by the traditional pastoral opening that the script demands, creating a horrible mishmash of styles. Episode one is very much Charles's story: it takes you back to his loveless childhood in a series of flashbacks, so you understand why he expects so little of life and why Bertha's *joie de vivre* opens something up in him that he's never experienced before. Not now. In Tarquin's filleted version he's a grumpy, cantankerous prig who'll seem utterly ruthless when he begins to make advances towards a vulnerable maid. Particularly now the aforementioned maid has become the star of the show, right from the off. The to-camera pieces punctuate the entire hour, jerking you out of the story and dumping you in a sub-Woody-Allen nightmare. I tentatively try to question them.

'It's terribly brave what you're doing, but I thought you weren't that sure about Emily?'

‘What’s your point, Lulu? I gather you two are the best of friends. Although maybe she’s not your very best friend…’

What drunken nonsense is he coming up with now? ‘Yeah, no, I like Emily. I’m just wondering whether the to-camera pieces are a bit in your face.’ I wish I could just shut up, but I feel deeply defensive about the way that Charles’s performance has been cut to ribbons.

‘There’s an honesty about her, Lulu, it’s what I’ve always said.’ He’s dragging on another stinky cheroot. ‘Eyes on the screen, this bit’s brilliant!’

It’s not, of course. It’s some tricksy montage of Charles riding and Bertha scrubbing, which gives the whole game away. There’s something vaguely suggestive about it, almost like it’s a dodgy rock video from the mid-eighties (a vibe that’s exacerbated by the way in which Charles’s long, flowing locks blow wildly in the wind, Jon Bon Jovi-esque, as he takes a jump). Suzanne is going to HATE the whole thing. In fact, everyone’s going to hate it, bar that minx Emily who’s somehow managed to manipulate Tarquin into making it the Emily show. Could they be… would they be? It’s too disgusting a thought to contemplate.

I’m both dreading the end (the inevitable post mortem) and longing for the end (need you ask?). Watching it has made my feelings for Charles bubble right up again: I want so much to warn him, but I’m not sure what it would achieve. When it finally finishes I try my very best to get by on meaningless platitudes, but I seem to alight on ones that have been out of use since the Second World

War. It's not surprising that the news it was both 'spellbinding' and 'riveting' isn't enough to satisfy the tanker that is Tarquin's ego.

'Riveting how? What was it that really grabbed you by the throat?'

I wish something would grab him by the throat. 'Erm, I loved all those exteriors. Percy riding… riding around.'

How crap a response is that?

'Aah, so it's Charles who floated your boat?'

'No! I just like action. I liked it when you had that shot of the carriage coming off the road. The wheels spinning and that horse bucking…' I'm so tired. If I wasn't this tired I wouldn't be giving a commentary straight out of the *Equestrian Times*. 'It was all great, Tarquin. I just wanna watch it again so I can really unpick it, and I know my sister would love it. Do you think I could maybe borrow it?'

'Do you promise not to show it to anyone else?'

'Cross my heart,' I say.

'Do you swear on your sister's life?'

I feel sick. 'What do you mean, swear on –'

He leans in towards me drunkenly. 'Only joking. Take it, enjoy it.'

I stand up, flooded with relief that I appear to have got away unscathed. 'Well, it's been really fun, but I guess we should call it a night.'

'Hang on, it's not all about me you know!'

Um, it so is. But for some reason Tarquin's got it in his head that he wants to see Emily's wedding dress before we part. We weave

our way unsteadily down the corridors, suddenly rendered spooky by the hour and the company. How can I, at my advanced age, still be scared of the dark? There's no way I'm grabbing Tarquin's hand, that's for sure, not even if the biggest rat in Britain comes rumba-ing down the corridor towards me in sparkly shoes. The doors clang shut behind us and I rootle around in my handbag for the key to the caravan. Tarquin bundles in after me, picking things up proprietorially as I seek out the frock.

'So here it is!' I tell him, holding it against the length of my body. He looks it up and down, looking me up and down in the process.

'You'll be pleased to know that your director approves.'

Oh, so pleased. If only I could devote my entire life to giving you pleasure, not just the next ten days. He steps towards me, rubbing the fabric between his fingers.

'I know it doesn't feel that great, but on camera it'll be absolutely fine.'

Tarquin makes no attempt to step away, fondling the neckline in a way that brings him way too close to my cleavage for comfort. I try to yank the dress away which, horrifically, he reads as me removing an unwanted obstacle between us. He keeps his hands right in position, cupping my left boob as he leans in for a snog. I turn my face away and attempt to peel his hand off.

'No, no. You're great, Tarquin, but… we just shouldn't go there.'

As he jerks backward I see a look of pure fury cross his face.

'What the fuck? What was tonight about exactly?'

'I thought we were having a work dinner, Tarquin. I'm not –'

‘What, you’re taken?’ he shoots back, bilious.

‘No, yes… it’s complicated.’

‘Too right it’s complicated.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ I ask him, a tide of fear ripping through me.

‘Oh, come off it, Lulu. I know, you know, and guess what? Before you know it a certain someone’s wife is going to know.’

‘Tarquin, please… how did you find out?’

‘Emily.’

‘Emily?!’

‘Yeah. Turns out your beloved, devoted twin sister can’t keep her trap shut.’

Rage and pain compete for space as I attempt to compute what’s happened. His attitude to Emily transformed after she stormed off-set, and this must be the reason. How could Alice do this to me? No wonder she’s been cooking up a storm. And how can I stop Tarquin, now lighting another one of his horrid little cigars, from tearing Charles’s family apart? I can’t bear to be the cause of such devastation. Would he really do that? Is he honestly that vindictive? I’d like to think not, but he’s so unpredictable that I can’t be sure.

‘It’s over, Tarquin, it’s completely over. Why would you want to do that? It won’t do anyone any good.’

‘There’s something really untrustworthy about you, Lulu. I’m not surprised you’ve been sniffing around someone else’s husband. And as for it being over, pull the other one. I’ve seen him looking at you

like a sick dog. His wife's a nice woman, she doesn't deserve the pair of you making a fool of her.'

I'm crying in earnest now, pleading with him to see sense, but he's completely intractable. I rip the door open.

'You are a total bastard,' I tell him. 'You're not doing this out of any concern for her, you don't care about anyone except yourself. I know what we did was wrong and that's why I ended it. All you'd be doing is causing more pain.'

He shakes his head at me, casting me a look of total contempt.

'I hate you!' I scream at him. 'I hate you and I hate your stupid episode. You're a talentless twat and a miserable excuse for a human being.'

I slam out, burning up with the enormity of what's happened. I can't believe what I've done. The human cost is suddenly so real, so horribly tangible. Is there anything I can do to stop the clock?

Chapter Eighteen

I find it surprisingly easy to hold it together for the long drive back. An icy calm has descended on me, an emotional permafrost that is protecting me from processing what's just happened. I can't yet feel Alice's betrayal, or the catastrophe of what it might unleash for Charles, but I know the impact will hit full force very soon. I don't wake her up when I get back, just climb into bed and long for sleep to scoop me up and cosset me. But it seems there really is no rest for the wicked. I start to go over and over what's just happened, trying to understand what could've possessed Alice to confide in a crocodile. Have I really been such a bad, neglectful sister that she's lost any sense of loyalty to me? Whichever way I cut the cake, I can't imagine our relationship ever recovering that blind, devotional innocence that's seen us through the worst of times.

Eventually I fall into an exhausted coma, broken shortly after by the jagged, insistent ring of my mobile. I scrabble around in the semi-darkness, the sky still an inky grey.

'Lulu? We've got a fucking emergency on our hands.' It's Suzanne's nasal twang greeting me, sounding way more panicked than I've ever heard her before. Oh God, oh God. Did Tarquin

decide to treat Bea to a late-night phone call of the most devastating kind?

'What's happened?'

'The costume van, Lulu, it's gone up like a tinder box. The fire brigade had to douse it. I don't think anything's going to be salvageable.'

'But we're shooting the wedding next week!'

'Do you think I don't realize that?!' She pauses, takes an audible puff on a fag. 'I'm sorry, sweetheart, I don't mean to take it out on you. But even with a massive insurance claim, I don't think we're going to be covered. And we've got to shoot next week – Emily's booked on a pilot that's shooting in Canada directly after.'

I sit down on the edge of my bed, thinking of all the work we poured into those costumes. Zelda would've been so proud of what we achieved and now they're nothing but smoky rags.

'Do you have any idea what might've happened?' asks Suzanne. 'There was nothing obvious, but… an iron? A kettle? Could anyone have left anything on in there?'

I'm struck by a sudden flashback to Tarquin's pinched little mouth dragging smugly on a cheroot as he cast me a contemptuous look.

'I'm – I'm not sure,' I say, unwilling to start a full-scale war before it's strictly necessary. 'Have you told Tarquin yet?'

'His phone's off. Hopefully he'll surface in the next hour or so. How was your night on the tiles? Fruitful? Not that any of it really matters right now.'

'I'll tell you when I see you. I'll be in the car in fifteen minutes.'

‘Good. I think there’ll be accident investigators swarming around within the hour. And, Lulu – once the sun’s up we’ve got to rouse Zelda. I’ve let this situation slide long enough: we need her now.’

For once in my life, I’m in full agreement with her. I’ve done my very best, but now I need Zelda on so many counts. I need her to tell me how to magic up fifteen elaborate costumes and countless plainer ones in a mere week. I need her to tell me how to play it with Tarquin and whether there’s any way of using this to buy his silence (if it is indeed his fault). And most of all I need her to give me a hug and promise me that I’m not a terrible person, simply reaping the punishment I richly deserve.

Even if I wanted to wake up Alice, there’s no time. I have the world’s fastest shower, throw on some ratty jeans and – suddenly remember that my car’s at the unit base. The obvious thing to do is borrow Alice’s, but it seems completely wrong to behave normally when something so cataclysmic is yet to be acknowledged. Two more frantic texts from Suzanne decide me, but I can’t find her handbag anywhere. I tiptoe into her room, only to be greeted by the sight of Angry Richard’s angry arse hanging off the side of the bed. He opens his eyes blearily and scowls at me, nostrils flaring like a raging horse. ‘Go back to sleep,’ I whisper, hastily extracting her keys from her bag. Wednesday has so much to recommend it thus far.

I arrive to find Suzanne pacing around the smoking caravan, smoking. I consider pointing out the irony, but I’m too depressed. Its walls are completely caved in and the roof has collapsed. It makes it

easy to see the wrecked costumes, wet and pathetic, scattered around the interior by the jets of water. I stifle a sob at the sight of the carnage: could Tarquin really have been stupid enough to cause this devastation?

Apparently he's on his way in, but Suzanne says he was evasive about his ETA.

'What the hell happened?' she asks me.

'I've got no idea,' I lie, taking in the destruction. 'But I'm gathering the troops. We'll get straight on with working out Plan B.'

'Oh yes, I'm sure you and Gareth'll have the perfect solution!' she snaps. 'The minute we find Zelda she's going to need to come in for an emergency meeting. I need the organ grinder as of now.'

I beat a hasty retreat to our office, where Gareth's frantically counting the remaining costumes.

'Thank God you're here,' I tell him, barrelling into his arms. We give each other a long hug, each of us pole-axed by what's happened.

'Still not a peep from Zelda?' he asks.

'No. I've left three messages. I've been racking my brains as to what we should do and the only thing I can think of is Tim Le Grande.'

'He'll never help us!'

'He won't help *us*, no, but maybe he'll help Zelda considering how far up shit creek we've got lodged. She was his assistant on *Casablanca* after all.'

'It wasn't *Casa*–'

‘Oh, you know what I mean.’

‘Look, Lulu, I’m really worried it was my laptop cable. I went online just before wrap last night and –’

‘Trust me, Gareth, it wasn’t down to you surfing the net for Muscle Marys.’

‘How do you know?’ he says, white and stressed.

‘I don’t know, but I think… Oh God, make one of those disgusting packet hot chocolates and I’ll tell you everything.’

And I do. I tell him absolutely everything from beginning to end, staring out of the window and down at my hands, unable to make eye contact. When I eventually run out of steam, he moves behind me, enveloping me in a hug.

‘Jeez, Louise. Literally.’

‘Do you think I’m a horrible, terrible person?’

‘No, darling, not at all. You’re not the one that’s married. You’re not the one betraying the person who loves them most. And you’re certainly not the one to blame.’

‘He’s not a bad person, honestly he isn’t.’

‘Maybe not, though frankly it’s debatable. However, he most certainly is a weak one.’

I start rambling on in his defence, trying to explain the complexity of it all, until Gareth puts a hand up to silence me.

‘Darling, with respect, it’s not the time. We’ve got more pressing fish to fry, namely Tarquin and Tim.’

Is it wrong of me not to tell Suzanne about Tarquin’s fag-laden presence in the caravan? I think not. The greater good has surely got

to be ensuring that the affair is kept under wraps at any costs: it's not like knowing how it happened will make the costumes spring back to life. Gareth and I construct a text which I send to Tarquin:

> Hi, Tarquin, just trying to deal with the damage. I can't think how it happened, can you?

I'm fairly confident he'll have the same suspicions as me, but he'll know that I'm keeping schtum, at least for now. Hopefully, hopefully, he'll think he owes me one.

Text sent, Gareth and I tally up all the fabric we've got left and try to work out how many of the simpler dresses it'll stretch to. Alice calls me twice, but I press cancel both times. Emily's going to be a whole other problem to deal with, but I cannot split myself in two (despite my rather successful attempt in the womb).

We summon the entire team, who are all as gutted as we are. I try my very best to gee them up, promising that we'll come up with a solution to the wedding party outfits if they get all hands to the pump on making up the background frocks. I feel way less confident than I sound, but they seem to buy it. I suddenly wonder if Zelda was bullshitting just as hard all those times she assured Gareth and me that she didn't give a fig about having gone thousands of pounds over budget. Realizing it's been an hour since my last attempt, I ring her again. It's Michael who picks up.

'Michael, it's Lulu. I'm sorry to be such a stalker, it's just that I desperately need Zelda. It's a total, total emergency or else I wouldn't be hounding her.'

‘I’m afraid she can’t speak to you.’

‘Michael, please…’

‘Lulu, she’s very close to the end. She was admitted to hospital last night. Right now it’s doubtful she’ll even make it to the end of the day.’

‘What do you mean? What do you mean?!’ My voice has transformed itself into a banshee’s wail while my legs are buckling beneath me.

‘We knew it was coming.’

‘But I didn’t!’ I sob. ‘I didn’t know it was coming.’ I suddenly realize in a blinding flash how evasive Zelda was, if only I’d chosen to notice. ‘*I’m on the home straight*,’ was what she said. I just didn’t think to check what she considered to be her ultimate destination.

Gareth takes the phone from me, keeping his arm around my shoulders as he has a calm, measured conversation with Michael. How can they be so stoic? I want to smash things and scream and shout. Her poor, poor boys – how little they know of what’s to come. They probably think the worst has arrived, but it’s not the hour of death with all the attendant fuss and huddling together that hurts the most. It’s later, when the two chairs in front of the teacher at parents’ evening cruelly mock your loss, or when your first proper partner needs to be evaluated by the grown-up who knows you best. I hope to God their depleted little family will be able to stitch itself together and cover over some of those gaps. But nothing and no one will ever make up for the fact that Zelda won’t be there any more.

Gareth cuts the call and encircles my hands in his. ‘Michael says we can go and say goodbye, although she’s lost consciousness. Or would you rather not?’

There’s no question for me – I have to say goodbye in whatever way I can. If only I’d known the last time that it was our final meeting. But when I think back to the time we had – the elephants and zebras and scones – I can’t imagine a nicer day. Of course I can’t: she stage-managed it perfectly. I wish I’d had the chance to tell her how much she meant to me, but I think it was stitched into every second of that afternoon.

When we arrive at the hospital, I can barely remember how we got there. Michael’s pacing the corridor and I worry all we’re doing is creating more chaos in what is a very private drama. I try to say that to him, but he assures me that she’d want me to say goodbye. Gareth decides to stay outside, so I go in alone. She looks so small in the bed, dwarfed by all the equipment that’s boxing her in. I don’t have a long, florid speech for her. Instead I simply take her hand and tell her goodbye and that I love her. I ask the nurse if there’s any chance she can hear and she gives a non-committal smile which allows me to hope against hope that she does. I sit by her side, my forehead planted on her hand, thinking of all the times I shared with her. How harsh she could be, particularly when I was naive and stupid and green, and how precious it made her approval when it finally arrived. I silently promise her I’ll be worthy of that approval, then leave the room, unable to look back. I cross paths with

Michael, who gives my arm a brief squeeze, clearly using every ounce of his strength to stay in control.

I don't have his mettle. I go to the loos and sob and sob, too distressed to make sense of any of it. Michael's told me that Gareth's borne the boys off for some food and I eventually follow them down to the canteen. They're stuffing French fries in their mouths and trying to pretend they're OK, but their red eyes and pale faces tell another story. I try to judge how best to help them. Eleven and thirteen, they're in that phase of early adolescence where showing weakness is an anathema (a condition exacerbated by their boarding-school education). I could choose to respect the fortress, but I know that it'll ultimately do them more harm than good. No man is an island, and especially when they're under this kind of attack.

'I'm so, so sorry,' I tell them. 'There's absolutely nothing I can say that will take any of this away, but I want to try and help in any pathetic, ridiculous way that I can. I lost my mum when I was way too young to deserve it, and if you want to talk about it, or cry about it, or shout about it, I will be around. It's so fucking unfair and you must be enraged!'

Jerry's frozen, tight face breaks a little at this. 'You said the F word!' he says, delighted.

'Don't tell me you don't say it all the time!' I reply. 'You're eleven, it's not like you're a baby.'

'Fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck,' he shouts, triggering a few horrified looks from other diners.

‘It’s s-o-o-o shit!’ joins in Dominic.

‘OK, let’s go outside and have a swearathon,’ I tell them. Gareth raises an eyebrow. ‘Take it from me, they need it,’ I tell him, hustling him and the boys away from the grey canteen. And they do. No one tells you how angry grief makes you, how much you want to rage at the sky and demand that some ethereal force pays you back for the terrible price it has exacted. Instead you’re expected to be miserable in a contained, almost charming fashion – a way that allows people to feel sympathetic, not scared. And you try, you really do – but the rage lingers on, searching for a target. I’m suddenly reminded of how Alice began extorting things from other children, forcing them to hand over Penguins from their lunchboxes like a pint-sized Don Corleone. Eventually she was found out and put into a term’s worth of detention; tea and sympathy was sadly lacking despite our loss. The tragic irony was that Mum would never have allowed it had she been there to intervene. I didn’t do anything so outlandish, although I always waited outside the window while she sat out her detention, keeping my beady eye on her from my vantage point on the climbing frame. Perhaps I didn’t need to act out, because she’d done it for the both of us.

We find a scrubby little park nearby and I explain the rules. You can swear as loudly as you like and use the very worst words you know. No one will blame you, no one will judge you, and after ten minutes we’ll stop and never mention what was said. I have to demonstrate, of course, but once the boys have unleashed themselves there’s no stopping them. Their use of the phrase ‘knob

juice' is so imaginative that even Gareth is shocked, although the tide of expletives coming from him is equally outrageous. All our frustration and distress comes pouring out until we're laughing hysterically, pushing each other to come up with even more ridiculous profanities. That's another thing no one tells you about death. That every emotion – good or bad – is blown up and magnified, rendered more vivid than you could possibly imagine. We're temporarily shaken out of the ridiculous mass delusion that we're immortal, forced to realize that one day the world will carry on without us in it. Perhaps there's something weirdly galvanizing and exhilarating about knowing in your very bones that life is short.

Eventually my alarm goes off and we all deflate, back to the reality that it's probably Zelda's last day on earth. We take the boys back upstairs, where Michael's having a cup of vile vending machine coffee outside the room. The boys sit either side of him, leaning in towards him like faithful gun dogs. They're all mustering up the strength to go back inside and see the version of Zelda that lies in the bed. It's her, of course, but also not. A big part of her has already left the building.

'Would you like us to stay?' I ask him. 'Whatever you want. I don't want to intrude, but if it would help? We could take the boys for supper…'

'No, you go,' he says, trying to force his reluctant mouth into a smile. 'But thank you, I'm really glad you came. I know she would be too. It wasn't that she didn't want to say goodbye, it was just that she didn't want to say it like this.'

Tears roll down my cheeks as I give him a hug. I tell him what I told his sons, that I want to help in any way I can. 'Any arrangements, just anything,' I add, trying to make the offer meaningful, then feel terrible that I've alluded to the funeral when she's not even gone. We hug the boys and then finally leave, although my legs feel like they're wading through quicksand as we retreat down the corridor. It seems so wrong, so disloyal, to abandon her, but I know that we must leave them to their last moments of intimacy.

Neither of us have eaten anything all day and we kid ourselves that we want to find food, when what we *really* want to find is booze. I know it's wrong to search for comfort at the bottom of a bottle, but trust me, sometimes nothing else will do. We find a dark, underground bar off the Edgware Road, largely populated by Middle Eastern men and bemused American tourists. We start with a neat whisky, chinking our glasses to Zelda and throwing back the burning liquid in a single gulp. Then we order a bottle of wine and a strange selection of snacks, which we pick at half-heartedly while we talk about her. I'm so angry with myself for not realizing: I keep going over all the conversations we had again and again, berating myself for my self-absorption.

'Darling, I know it sounds trite, but it wouldn't have made any real difference,' counters Gareth. 'It's like the fire – knowing what caused it won't bring our costumes back. Every time you'd seen her it would've been all about her dying. It was probably a blessed relief that she could prattle on about long-lost shags or her and Michael's

courtship without everything being blanketed in gloomy portentousness.'

'Do you think that's why she didn't tell me?'

'Yes and no. I'm sure she couldn't bear you to be plonked back in it all. Maybe she felt guilty. She wasn't…' He pauses, choked. 'I mean, she isn't terribly good at sentiment. Easier to just get on with it, live in the moment.'

'But I wasn't sharing that moment. She was protecting me, lying to me.'

'Because that's what she thought you needed. And perhaps because that's what she needed. And if you can't ask for what you need when you're dying, when can you ask?'

Feeling myself in danger of falling back down the rabbit hole, I order another whisky chaser for us both, after which we are most definitely drunk. We force the conversation in less intense directions – the ghastliness of Tarquin, Charles's sexual character – things that make us laugh harder than they really deserve to the point where we're nearly falling off our bar stools.

'Take it from me, Lulu, Charles is a dead loss. Anyone who can say "making love" with a straight face deserves to be taken out and shot. You'd be much better with that brutish policeman.'

'What, Ali?' I slur, like I know whole battalions of policemen (do they come in battalions or should it be squads?). 'Fat hope. I mean, fat chance. He's been had by Jenna.'

'Had in the biblical sense?'

‘I assume so, yes,’ I say, feeling intensely miffed. ‘Oh, good for them!’

‘No, not good for them, Lulu. He had masculinity *and* integrity, which is a rare combination.’

‘Since when did you have such a yearning for a man with integrity?’

‘I don’t yearn for it for me, but I yearn for it for you! If you handed control of your love life over to me I guarantee you’d experience a dramatic uplift.’

‘Pah!’ is my considered and thoughtful response as I pour the final trickle of wine into our over-exercised glasses. We stay another few minutes, till the bell for last orders starts to sound like the ‘clanging chimes of doom’ (to quote Midge Ure). I’ve been compulsively checking my phone for any word from the hospital, but there’s nothing. We decide we’ll have to try and treat tomorrow like as normal a working day as we can manage. Zelda would want us to find a way to solve this crisis, and right now all the adrenaline and the whisky coursing through our bodies is making us feel like we can. We’re her disciples, we’re her successors. It’s only when I collapse into the back of a cab that the deep sadness of it all punches me in the face.

I hope to God that Alice is in bed, but the living-room light is blazing out, curtains flung open, as I approach the house. Alice is watching MTV, arms folded in moody concentration. I try to slip up the stairs with a muttered greeting, but there’s no way she’s going to let me get away with that.

‘Don’t walk away from me, Lulu! I’ve called you, like, five times, and you haven’t even bothered to so much as text me.’

‘What can I say? It’s been a tough day.’ I know I sound sarky and trite, but I’m too angry to ask her for the comfort I so desperately need.

‘I can’t believe you’re being this pathetic about me and Richard. How dare you guilt trip me about it after everything that’s happened?’

I spin round, a surge of rage shooting through me.

‘You’re accusing *me* of guilt tripping *you*? All I’ve done is try to protect you. You’ve been so fucking judgemental about me and Charles that you somehow thought it gave you the right to tell Emily. *Oh, my terrible, slutty sister, you won’t believe what she’s done.* I wouldn’t expect my worst enemy to betray me like that, let alone my twin!’ I’m boiling over now, all the fury and upset combining into one volcanic eruption.

Alice’s hand is over her mouth, stricken.

‘I really didn’t mean to tell her…’

‘Oh, well that’s all right then. What, you just tripped and your mouth fell open?’

‘I thought she knew! She told me she knew… And then I felt terrible that I’d talked to her about it, but she wheedled it out of me.’

I can just imagine Emily employing her scant acting talent in an elaborate con trick. And I suppose she sort of did know. Looking

back, I can see she's been subtly fishing for weeks, slyly observant of those telltales that we've unwittingly displayed.

'It's no bloody excuse, Alice, this is a complete disaster! She's told Tarquin.'

'Are you sure? She promised she'd keep her mouth shut.'

'Oh, she promised, did she? How naive *are* you, Alice? That girl's got the morals of an alley cat. She'll use anything she can to give herself a leg up.'

'It'll blow over, I know it will,' she says, a certain breeziness in her tone that's like a red rag to a bull. I know it's just because she's so desperate for it to be true, but why does she have to tie everything up with a neat little bow – palatable, safe and controlled? Nothing and no one is allowed to challenge Alice's world view. Sometimes it feels like we're living in an Enid Blyton book, the way she whitewashes the inconvenient truths.

'IT WON'T!' I shout, aware that this is about much more than me and Charles, but unable to pull back. 'It won't be OK, nothing will. Thanks to you, the whole fucking thing's going to be public knowledge.'

'Thanks to me?' she snaps back savagely. This is classic Alice: when she can't make good she goes on the attack. 'Excuse me, Lulu, but I'm not the one who decided to take up with a married man the moment his wife's back was turned. I'm not the one who lied about it, time after time. If you wanna talk about being a good twin then let's start with you barefacedly lying to me for *weeks*!'

‘There’s your answer!’ I scream back. ‘Of course I didn’t tell you because you’re too bloody simplistic about everything to have had the remotest understanding. You just would’ve lectured me, and told me off, and acted like we were still eight years old. You’re not the boss, however much you might act like it.’

‘Oh, excuse me for not condoning your sordid little escapade. You’re kidding yourself it’s love, but it’s just the oldest cliché in the book. You’ve got a fucking cheek calling me simple after what you’ve let him get away with.’

‘Yeah, like Richard’s some kind of saint! He’s an angry bully who’s dumped you once and won’t waste any time doing it again.’

An expression of pure fury crosses Alice’s features, a look that tells me I should do everything in my power to defuse this horrific, eviscerating conflict. This goes way too deep for both of us and we need to slam on the brakes before we crash. But having seen Zelda lying on her deathbed, I’m in some kind of peculiar parallel universe. Today nothing feels sacred, not even my most precious relationship.

‘Oh, Lulu, do you care?’ she asks, a horrible sarcastic smirk twisting her features. ‘Do you *really*? How very touching. Because the only person you seem to have been remotely interested in these last few weeks is yourself. I don’t know who you are any more, you certainly don’t feel like my twin.’

I feel cut to the quick, completely floored. We’ve never said that to each other, never ever. ‘How can you say that to me?’ I wail. ‘If you *knew*, if you knew what today’s been like…’

‘What, did Charles cut you dead in the coffee queue?’ she sneers. Alice gets this hardness sometimes, this need to put me in my place by pretending to be invincible. It cuts me off at the knees, turns me to mush.

‘No, no. Zelda’s dying, she might even have gone by now.’ Great racking sobs consume me as I think of her in that room. ‘She’s in hospital, all hooked up to machines…’

She edges towards me, puts a tentative hand on my arm.

‘Are you sure it’s as bad as you think?’

And it’s that statement which makes me completely lose the plot.

‘Yes, Alice, it is as bad as I think. Death is pretty much final – I’m not sure even you could manage to whitewash that away. But, oh no, hang on, you’ve managed to team up with Dad and sweep Mum under the carpet like she never existed, so maybe you could.’

‘Fucking hell, Lulu, Zelda’s not our mum! She’s not even related to you. The amount of times she’s made your life hell…’

And with a brilliant piece of sleight of hand, she manages to totally belittle my relationship with Zelda and completely sidestep how I feel about her colluding with Dad. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so betrayed, so despairing. Maybe it’s not just her who feels like she’s lost a twin. Before I know it, I’m throwing as much as I can into a holdall and running out on to the street to hail a cab. Alice screams after me, holds on to my arm, but I won’t so much as look at her. As far as I’m concerned, I’m on my own.

Chapter Nineteen

Every morning I wake up eyeball to eyeball with Robert Redford. Zelda's downstairs film den is dominated by a huge poster for *The Way We Were*: Robert strides down the beach intensely, arm tightly wrapped around Barbra Streisand's shoulders. I don't know if it's the togetherness that she responded to, or how achingly handsome he is – it's yet another question that I long to ask her, but will never have the chance to. She slipped away around the time that my and Alice's argument hit a crescendo, after which I threw myself into a cab and landed on Gareth's doorstep. He and I got the news around four a.m. and spent the next day in a state of disbelief. We told Michael that we would tell all the work people who needed to know, but every time we tried to get the words out the shock hit us anew. Perhaps it's a blessing that the strictures of production mean the show must go on, but I'm balancing the nightmarish costume famine with helping Michael and the boys organize the funeral. I was so glad that he took my offer of help at face value, and the easiest thing seemed to be to come and stay with them. It might sound ridiculous and sexist, but they barely seem able to boil an egg between the three of them. Making sure they eat makes me feel vaguely useful, and the boys seem able to share a little bit of what they're going

through with me. The funeral's tomorrow, and the arrangements seem endless. I've promised Michael I'll read a poem, but the idea fills me with dread. I'd much rather retreat behind organizing ham sandwiches than face the idea of keeping a lid on my emotions in front of over a hundred people. Not on my own.

Alice and I haven't spoken since that terrible night. I miss her horribly, but something's hardened in me. The things she said cut so deep that I'm almost frightened to put my trust back in her. I always imagined we'd part because someone too wonderful to walk past would come into one of our lives: I never imagined it would happen like this. She left me a series of messages in the first twenty-four hours, none of which I responded to. They veered between conciliatory and cross, but none of them made me believe she realized how betrayed I felt. I know there are things I said that were cruel and unnecessary, but this whole catastrophic conflict seems like it's about so much more than the immediate events. All our lives Alice has held on to being eight minutes older, eight minutes wiser – the twin with the answers. And I've let her, because it's made me feel safe. Loving someone I can't afford to love with such ludicrous, illogical intensity somehow destroyed the whole edifice we'd built for ourselves. If I could've stepped back into line, I would've, but I'm not sure I'll ever be the sister she wants now. A life without her is unimaginable, but too much else is collapsing around my ears for me to be able to pick my way through it. Besides, after that first flurry of phone calls she's been shockingly silent. Perhaps she really has given up on me.

There's not remotely enough time for me to lie in bed stroking my chin and sagely reflecting. I've spent the few days frantically trying to get hold of Tim Le Grande, with no success. My only hope is persuading him to lever open the crates and lend me those costumes, but his agent won't let me anywhere near him. Apparently he's taken the break in filming to oil his aging limbs on a beach in Mustique, not to be disturbed under any circumstances. I begged her to at least pass on the news of Zelda's death, but she wouldn't even promise that. I'm trying to run up an approximation of what we had before with the tiny sum of money and sliver of time that's left, but I fear it's going to look tawdry and cheap. Which might be entirely fitting, considering the dog's dinner that Tarquin's created. Suzanne hated the cut as much as I predicted, and used it to insist that he let her into the edit. Right now there's a titanic battle of wills going on between the two of them and the execs, but with the level of life, love and death that I'm dealing with off camera I'm finding it hard to engage.

The investigations into the fire are still inconclusive; I can't work out if Tarquin's continued hush about the affair is down to anxiety about his part in it, or an unexpected shred of common decency. I'm fairly confident Emily will keep her trap shut unless disseminating the information becomes useful to her again. Right now, with her show-stopping gown burnt to cinders, she needs me more than she ever has. There's a special on orange corduroy in Walthamstow Market right now and I won't be afraid to use it.

I've convinced myself there's no reason to panic Charles unnecessarily, but I know my decision not to tell him the secret's out is largely born of cowardice. I can't bear more conflict, more upset – not now. He sent a lovely text about Zelda, suggesting a cup of tea, and it took every fibre of moral resolve for me to say no. If I see him I'll fall straight into his arms, and I've vowed that I'm going nowhere near that dangerous embrace unless I can have him on defensible terms. I've wanted more than anything to see him these last few days, which has just served to remind me that it has to be the whole cake or nothing at all. It's so awful not to be able to call the man you love because he's not actually your man. And even if I did make the SOS call, I know it would never be as simple as that SOS call I made to Ali. I was illogically sure that he'd deliver what I needed from him, however pissed off he was, whereas any interaction with Charles won't just be about my need for comfort and succour. We'll inevitably get bogged down in the monumental mess that we've managed to cook up for ourselves.

Still, the intermittent texts we've swapped have provided a welcome punctuation. I've got to go to set today and there's no denying I'm still thinking too hard about my outfit. Infuriated by my superficiality, haunted by Alice's vitriol, I punish myself with a pair of dreary, beige trousers. They look like cricket whites and make my arse resemble a jelly mould: no one could desire me in these babies. Pleased with my peculiar brand of self-flagellation, I venture upstairs. Michael's at the kitchen table, hunched over an exercise book.

‘Good morning!’ he says brightly. ‘Sleep well?’ Honestly, his level of stiff upper lip bravado is a sight to behold. Partly I admire it, partly it horrifies me – the English public school system has a lot to answer for. I’m glad I’ve been here to supervise a few swearathons.

‘Yeah, OK,’ I say, pouring myself a cup of the carbolic coffee that he seems to live on right now. ‘Toast? Scrambled egg?’ I ask encouragingly. Looking at his grey pallor, I’m doubtful he’s even gone to bed. ‘I’m going to have something.’

‘Honestly, you’re not a short order cook! I’m fine.’

I glance towards him, catching sight of the page, which is covered in scribbled-out writing. He smiles ruefully, gesturing at the page. ‘Eulogy. It just seems so insulting somehow. How can you possibly boil Zelda down into ten minutes of pithy sound bites? I’d need hours to do her justice, absolutely hours. And it wouldn’t make sense either, because she was so bloody complicated. That was one of the things I loved about her, even though the contradictions could be utterly infuriating. Sorry… sorry.’

‘What are you apologizing for?’ I ask him, relieved that the British reserve is giving way. ‘Everything you said just then sounded incredibly true. Maybe you should just say that, admit you can’t cover it, and then – I don’t know – pick her greatest hits. God, sorry, that was so trite.’

‘It wasn’t, it wasn’t at all. It was jolly good advice. And I will have a slice of toast, since you ask.’

I know he’s humouring me, both with the compliment and the acceptance of toast, but I hope that he will be able to access that

honesty about who Zelda really was. A few tears plop into the toaster, but luckily I'm not electrocuted. He and the boys are out this evening having supper with some kindly neighbours and I vow that I'll use the time to practise my poem. I don't want to be a sobbing wreck at the front of the church – it seems almost presumptuous to take on the mantle of grief in that way – but I know that if making a slice of toast is this challenging then saying a formal goodbye might totally floor me.

It's funny: everything at work seems trivial when I'm in the house, but as soon as I'm in the car driving to set, all the bogey men start looming large. The costume situation is a real crisis; this was Zelda's swan song and I can't bear for it to be a damp squib. I pull over and give Tim Le Grande's ghastly agent one more try, but the office is on answering machine. The costumes we're cobbling together are a pale imitation of what we had. Tarquin's too cowed and distracted to read the riot act, but I know how lame it will look. I'm honestly not even sure how we'll get them ready in time considering the wedding shoot is three days hence and the funeral's tomorrow. I waver for a minute, wishing I could speak to Alice. We've always had our bubble – a place that's entirely ours, beyond the reach of boys or work or even other family – but now it's popped. I start dialling her, momentarily determined to find a way through, but there's too much to address. After the funeral, I promise myself. If I can get through the funeral then I can deal with anything.

I've got to do a fitting for Emily's emergency replacement dress today. I begged Gareth to do it, insisting that even Emily couldn't

believe that he would have lecherous intent, but he point blank refused. I'll just have to maintain an air of icy professionalism and avoid the urge to treat her like a human pin cushion. I go to the wardrobe caravan and steel myself for the long walk to her winnebago. There's a tentative knock on the metal door and I freeze. There are so many people I don't want to see – and one person I do. When Charles's lovely, familiar face appears, I'm so relieved.

'Hi,' I say, choked.

'Hey,' he says, stepping towards me. I barrel into his arms, giving way to the sobs that threaten to engulf me every minute of the day. 'Angel, I'm so sorry,' he mutters into my hair. 'You must feel dreadful.' We stand there for what feels like an age. I don't speak, just try to absorb security and comfort from his presence. As he's not a rock and I'm not a limpet, he eventually pulls away.

'We've got to talk, this is ridiculous,' he says.

'It's too dangerous, Charles. Nothing's changed, and unless it does… Besides, it's not about us right now.'

He puts a finger to my lips, stifling the end of my sentence. 'I'm going to come and find you this evening. I won't take no for an answer.'

'But –'

'Just hear me out, Lulu.' He moves back towards me and, fearing a kiss, I go for another hug. Then he's gone, leaving me desperate to know what he meant. Has something happened? Could Bea have found out, or even worse been told – surely if she had I'd know

about it? After a couple more minutes of pointless internal speculation I force myself to stop. My stupid, painful affair does not deserve attention right now: the only thing that matters is Zelda. I think about texting him and telling him not to pursue me tonight, but the craving hasn't yet abated.

Emily is the most subdued I've ever seen her. I try not to give the merest hint of the devastation she's caused, pinning an unflattering swathe of beige taffeta around her with barely a word.

'Sorry about Zelda,' she says prosaically.

'Thank you,' I reply coldly, stepping away to survey the effect. It doesn't look that much better than my trousers: it's like I've unexpectedly been appointed president of the Beige Marketing Board.

'But – but – that bluey colour was so lovely on me,' she sniffles.

Of course it's pleasurable to prick her vanity, but I'm almost as gutted as she is. I was so proud of what we'd created and now it's literally gone up in a puff of smoke.

'We can't always have what we want though, can we?' I tell her like a harsh Victorian governess. 'The seamstresses need to get to work immediately to give us any chance of being ready, so you need to step out of it.'

'Lulu!' she says, bottom lip wobbling like a toddler. 'I'm not some bit part, I'm the… the star!'

I look at her, face immobile. 'You're a star. A twenty-four carat star. That's why I know you'll shine, whatever we put you in.'

And with that I sweep out, leaving her to get changed alone. I hope I haven't pushed her too far. The last thing I need is her attempting some ludicrous blackmail with forty-eight hours to go. Why won't Tim Le Grande get his shiny, brown arse off the beach and ring me? I take the wretched dress back to the unit base, where Gareth is supervising operations. He gives me a brief, stressed hug infused with smoke and sleeplessness. I hold the dress up contemptuously and he wrinkles his nose. 'Let's get the girls on the case,' he says reluctantly. We spend the rest of the afternoon vacillating between funeral arrangements and fantasy wedding arrangements, only needing a christening to complete the births, marriages and deaths triumvirate. Gareth's been amazingly practical, helping with all the boring details like parking and catering, which Michael is too grief-stricken to engage with. I leave earlyish, wondering whether Charles really will tip up tonight. The horror of an affair is that there's no way of knowing the answers to either the big questions or the little ones. He may well appear, large as life and twice as natural, but equally any number of domestic travails could sweep him away from me; just as he may choose to put an end to his marriage or decide to sail forth into a long and unhappy old age. I'm suddenly infuriated by my own powerlessness – I can't remain his stooge very much longer. Even so, when my phone rings I swerve to the kerb and snatch it up.

'Lulu?'

'Jenna?!'

'Oh, thank God you picked up.'

Don't tell me: she's been dumped by a dustman after having sex in the back of his dumpster. Or Ali's seen the error of his ways and exited stage left. Either way, I am so not in the mood.

'What's up?' I ask unenthusiastically.

'I wasn't calling to talk about me, Lulu. You've got to talk to Alice! The two of you… this is terrible.'

'Look, Jenna,' I snap, 'you don't understand how complicated it is. What she did –' I'm about to say 'unforgivable' but I stop myself. Surely nothing is unforgivable when you started as one entity? Even if she killed someone I'd have to forgive her. Hell, if she killed Emily I'd applaud her. 'It's not been right for a while,' I continue. 'We've been growing apart for ages, she's been so bloody judgemental! I'm not proud of what I did, but –'

'She just worries about you, Lulu, that's why she invited… invited Ali.'

She at least has the good grace to sound sheepish.

'I've barely heard from her since the row. A couple of messages and then pretty much nothing. I've been organizing a *funeral*, Jenna! It's tomorrow.' I can hear a shrill hysteria in my voice, which makes me realize how abandoned I feel. I've done this once before, but at least we were together. How can she let me go through it alone? Does she really not understand how much Zelda meant to me?

'That's how *she* feels, Lulu.'

'How's that?'

'She wrote you that whole letter and you didn't even *text* her!'

'What letter?'

‘She wrote you a whole letter about everything, she put it through the letter box.’

‘No, she didn’t, I would’ve got it.’ Oh no. She thinks I’m staying in Gareth’s mansion block in Warwick Avenue. I’m sure he doesn’t check the stacked-up communal post from one week to the next; he hates bills nearly as much as I hate rats.

‘I didn’t get it, Jenna, I didn’t get it.’

‘Well, that’s good! Really, it’s good – at least you didn’t get it and ignore it. Now you just need to speak to each other.’

‘You’re right,’ I say, suffused with a wave of gratitude. I know it’s nowhere near as simple as that, but I’m mighty relieved that Alice has tried to make contact in a significant way. And a letter means more to us than most. We set up a dead letter box in our tree house sometime after Mum died, somehow thinking that she’d be able to swoop down in the night and find out what we’d been up to. We’d leave each other missives too, things we didn’t want to say out loud. Confessions to clothes borrowed and lost, allegiances with classmates we’d designated sworn enemies. Perhaps she’s finally grasped how visceral the connection between then and now is for me.

I never thought I’d hear myself say this, but maybe I’ve been unfair on Jenna. ‘How are you? Really?’ I grit my teeth and ask the million-dollar question. ‘How’s it going with Ali?’

‘Oh, Lulu, that’s the other reason I’m calling. I feel so bad about all of that.’

‘Don’t,’ I say, although I’m gratified that she does. Is it just wounded pride that he chose her over me? Was it that our kiss wasn’t as hot from where he was standing, or could he sense that my mind was elsewhere? ‘I told you he was fair game and he chose you.’

‘The thing is, now I’ve met Doug, I feel duty bound to come clean.’

‘Doug? Who’s Doug?’

‘Funnily enough, he’s an undertaker. I met him in Greggs on the Holloway Road. Do you get those moments when only a pasty will do?’

‘Um, not really.’ I turn the engine off, sensing this one could run and run.

‘Oh, I do, that’s why I was in Greggs. Doug was on his break, and he’d just popped in to buy a round of cheese and onion for the rest of the boys. He’s so sweet like that, really considerate.’ Jenna’s always mistress of the detail, even though the man in question becomes an irrelevancy within a matter of days. ‘And there was a woman with like, sextuplets, ahead of us, real brats, and it’s taking an age, so I roll my eyes at him and he winks and before you know it he’s asked me out!’

‘Right,’ I say, wondering where this is going. Hopefully not a quickie in a crematorium. The very thought of a crematorium makes my stomach turn over. I look at my watch and think about reducing Jenna to a low hum on speaker phone while I zip back to Zelda’s, but I’m too curious to know what happened with Ali. The

monologue continues for what feels like an age, romping through a candlelit meal at TGI Friday, a trip to the vet to get his pit bull castrated and a weekend in a caravan in Anglesey. Eventually I can't bear it any more.

'Jenna, look, I'm sorry but I've really got to get on. Is the upshot that you dumped Ali for Doug?'

'No, I didn't, Lulu, no.'

She seems remarkably chipper for a woman dumped by about the hundredth man in as many days. I feel peculiarly vindicated: he *is* a shit, snogging me and leaving with someone else moments later. I clearly had a lucky escape. But when I say that to Jenna, she immediately goes on the defensive.

'Oh, he's not, he's not!' counters Jenna. 'He's the perfect gentleman. I'm afraid I was a tiny bit economical with the truth.'

'Economical how?'

'Lulu, don't take this the wrong way, but sometimes I feel like you think I'm a little bit of a loser.'

'N-o-o-o! No, of course I don't think that,' I say, feeling horrible for my transparent meanness.

'Mmm, if you say so. Well, it does rather get me down. The way you just assumed he wouldn't go for me.'

'I didn't,' I say lamely.

'Well, if you did, you were quite right.'

'But you went home with him!'

'He took me home, which was rather different.'

'How so?'

‘I got rather too stuck into the tequila, if I’m honest. I’m not proud of this, but when I did the last shot I ended up vomiting into my pina colada glass.’

Oh my God. That could be the world’s most disgusting image.

‘It could happen to anyone.’

‘I was mortified, Lulu, mortified. I was clearly in no state to be out on the town, so Ali very sweetly offered to take me home. He just made me a cup of coffee and left. Oh, apart from the bit where he asked me how best to play it with you.’

I’m struggling to compute all the new information coming my way.

‘Well, whatever you told him he’s ignored you. Haven’t heard a peep.’

‘Mmm. That’s roughly what I told him – play it cool, hang back. I’m not proud of myself. You said you didn’t want him and I rather did.’

I fight down a wave of unwarranted irritation. It’s my just deserts for being so relentlessly dismissive of Jenna all this time, despite the fact that she blatantly cares deeply about my sis. I’m a little bit excited that Ali felt the heat between us, but I swiftly bat the feeling away. He doesn’t deserve to compete with Charles for my affections, not when he’s already been chewed up and spat out by one love triangle.

Charles: bloody hell, I’ve got to get off the phone. I promise Jenna that Alice and I will talk and screech off at a pace that would give Ali due cause to have me banned. I’m grateful for the adrenaline if

I'm honest: right now it's the only thing that counteracts the sadness that suffuses my every waking moment. Will it be easier or harder once the funeral's over? At least we've still got a fuck-off celebration of Zelda's magnificence to come, whereas afterwards we'll just be left slowly adjusting to a world without her in it.

Charles texts while I'm en route, leaving me only enough time to race in and sweep some mascara around my puffy little eyes before he lands on the doorstep. I've had no space to wonder what it is he's come to say: is there anything significant to report, or is it simply concern for my current situation? He's taken aback by my far from glamorous outfit but swiftly recovers, producing a bottle of champagne from behind his back with a flourish. It's about the last thing I feel like drinking, although maybe I'm being churlish. 'Thanks,' I say, body-swerving a kiss. All I want is a hug, and – my God – do I crave it. He eventually peels me off him for the second time of the day and follows me to the kitchen. What would Zelda think if she could see us now?

He opens the bottle theatrically as I hand him glasses. He pours it and chinks: 'To us!' I smile weakly back at him, suddenly as unsure of myself as I've ever been. What are we doing here exactly?

'How are you, darling?' he asks, cocking his head to one side with a sympathetic smile.

'I just feel so… so empty, I suppose. It's such a cliché, but I can't believe that I'll never see her again. And I know that this feeling will last so, so long. It never really goes entirely, it just dies down and then jumps up and savages you when you least expect it.'

‘You can’t know that, Lulu. You might start feeling better far sooner than you think.’

‘But I *do* know. I don’t know why everyone thinks it’s incomparable with losing Mum. It’s *not*!’ Hot tears flood down my face and before I know it he’s gathered me back up in his arms.

‘I didn’t know you’d lost your mum, how terrible. How old were you?’

I pull back, shocked.

‘I told you, the night we first slept together. I told you then. When you told me all about Bea and how Max struggles so much.’ I literally remember every scrap he confided, everything. How could he forget?

‘Did you? Sorry, sweetheart, memory like a sieve,’ he says, giving his head a comedy slap.

I can’t face being annoyed with him; instead I stay where I am, subtly leaking snot on to his expensive cashmere jumper. How disgusting am I? I’m probably only three evolutionary steps away from vomiting into a glass. He draws me closer in, kissing my face. Is this OK – it’s not my lips after all? Although when it becomes my lips I don’t stop him, just gratefully accept the distraction. However, when he pushes a questing hand down the front of my top I jerk backwards.

‘Please don’t do that! We’ve agreed… and even if we hadn’t agreed, I just couldn’t do that, not tonight.’

‘I’ve got something to tell you,’ he says, reluctantly withdrawing his hand. ‘Something rather drastic.’

‘What is it?’ I ask, stomach churning but not in a good way – it’s more dread than excitement. I’m too wrung out for any more fireworks.

‘Lulu, I’ve made a decision. I’m leaving.’

I jerk backward, shocked.

‘Leaving?’

‘I have to. How can I stay with a woman I barely speak to when the woman I want to be with is in such terrible pain?’

Be careful what you wish for. It’s not violins and songbirds striking up in my heart, it’s more vultures and air-raid sirens. Where have they come from? I try to gather up my thoughts, find some kind of coherence.

‘Charles, are you sure? Are you sure that’s what you want? The children – I know how much you love your children. You realize what it would mean?’

A flicker of something crosses his face: is it panic?

‘I can’t carry on living a lie. I need to be true to myself, true to you.’

Maybe it’s paranoia, but his ardour suddenly feels faintly scripted. What will it be like when the champagne corks have stopped popping and the beige trousers seem like the height of glamour? Or when he’s crippled by guilt and maintenance?

‘Have you started the conversation? Does Bea know?’

‘In a manner of speaking.’

‘Charles, are you sure about this? What you’re throwing away? You haven’t… you haven’t even told me you love me…’

‘I have, I do. Why are you doubting me?’

‘You haven’t. You said you were *very, very fond* of me. You know how much you mean to me, but I don’t want to be responsible for you doing something you’ll regret. If you’re really going to do this you’ll need some space to think about it. For the dust to settle.’

‘Why do you keep questioning me like this?’ he demands angrily.

‘I’m not,’ I say, ‘I just want you to be sure. Do you even know me well enough to know what you’re buying in to?’

‘Of course I know you,’ he snaps.

I reach out a hand towards him, trying to placate him. ‘I know exactly what you mean. I feel like I know every scrap of you in one sense, every single last bit. But there’s so much I don’t know. I don’t know what A levels you got, or who your best friend is or –’ he’s looking distinctly unimpressed, but I blunder on – ‘if you like Marmite. And you know my best bits, but how are you going to feel when you find out how neurotic I am? Or how judgemental I can be? I just don’t want you to be disappointed, not if you’ve sacrificed so much for me.’

I look at him, silently imploring him to understand that I’m trying to ground us, give it a chance to be real, rather than belittling what he’s saying. Could infatuation turn to something more solid, something that could sustain over a lifetime? Or would my imperfections ultimately render me as much of a disappointment as Bea seems to be?

‘This isn’t some kind of adolescent pash. Jesus, Lulu, you’re all I think about! Bea’s got many sterling qualities, but she’s half the

woman you are. She's so domineering, so controlling. She treats me like some kind of wayward son half the time.' I remember her gliding around that cocktail party, checking on people's drinks and making introductions. She wanted it to be perfect and I suspect she wanted it to be perfect for his benefit. It wasn't like she was going to see any of us again. I'm straining to demonize her, to make his version of her authentic, but somehow I can't.

'Maybe she just worries about you?' I say. 'Maybe when she's being controlling it's because she cares and – and it comes out wrong.' A sob comes up as I think of Alice. I can't bear to not speak to her. Why haven't I prioritized making it OK over everything else?

'Why are you doing this?' he shouts.

'Because one of us needs to be a grown-up!' I shout back. 'One of us needs to make sure you're not going to ruin three people's lives for a passing infatuation.' I calm down a bit, reach for his hand. 'If you love me as much as you say you do…' I pause. 'Charles, look me in the eye and tell me that you love me.'

'Oh, for God's sake!'

'Tell me you love me. Because if you love me like you need to then you'll still love me in a month or two, or in a year. Which is exactly why you need to take some time out.'

'I *do*! I do love you.'

'Then say it. Say "I love you".'

'I love you,' he declares, but there's something florid and hollow in his delivery. Who in their right mind would love an actor? I turn

away, choked. There's something not right, something above and beyond all the obvious things that are wrong.

'I can't believe you're doing this!' he shouts, striking the counter. 'Patronizing me, treating me like this is some kind of mid-life crisis. I've laid myself on the line and you've thrown it back in my face.'

Oh no: that's exactly what it suddenly feels like. A man whose whole identity is built on being handsome, suddenly forced to face his own mortality by greying temples and the beginnings of middle-aged spread. A final fling before he submits himself to a career playing distinguished dads in insurance ads. That's too harsh. I know it's more than that – I was there for God's sake – but I'm not sure that it's muscular enough to withstand the grief and pain and anger that will ambush it as soon as we take the next step. Even if I could withstand it, something tells me he's not strong enough.

'Charles –'

'No!' he says, jabbing his finger at me. 'I was ready to give up everything for you, everything. I don't know why I bothered. Maybe you're not the woman I thought you were.'

And with that he slams out of the house, refusing to answer any of the frantic calls I make to him afterwards. Was I wrong? Should I have reacted with unbridled joy instead of an unexpected rush of caution? In the moment it wasn't a choice, it was a response that came from somewhere above and beyond the fevered romance of the last few weeks. I want so much to call Alice, but I can't unburden myself with all of this when we've got so much to sort out. Instead I lie in bed reciting my poem over and over, eventually

succeeding in staying dry-eyed for a full three lines. I don't think I've ever felt as alone as I do tonight. Let's hope tomorrow really is another day…

Chapter Twenty

Michael offers for me to come in the family car, but I decide that Gareth and I need to ride out this particular storm together. I kiss the boys goodbye and get on the back of Gareth's moped, hoping it doesn't look disrespectful to turn up perched on the pillion. He's rightly pointed out it's the nippiest way to get through the stinky London traffic, and God knows it's congested today. The last thing I want to do is prove Zelda right about my punctuality on this particularly momentous day.

Do I think she's up there, keeping a beady eye on proceedings? I'm not sure. My views on the afterlife veer around wildly depending how much I crave comfort. I certainly don't think there's a kindly man with a greying beard doling out grace and favour from a pillowy cloud, but equally I can't bear to think that those we love simply crumble to dust in the ground. Alice is much more materialist about it all nowadays. No dead letter boxes for her, just deadness. 'What does it matter, if you can't speak to someone?' she'd say. 'There's no point them being there then, and by the way they're not.' Sometimes I love her certitude about things, sometimes I hate it – maybe it's time I simply accepted it. As soon as I get back

from the funeral, I'll call her. The very moment I step through the front door.

The church is in the outskirts of Barnes, down by the river. Gareth and I sit in the second pew, near enough for me to be able to step up easily when the time comes. I look at the order of service, finding I'm roughly in the middle. Funerals are not unlike weddings in an awful, macabre way. In both cases you sit in a church waiting for the person who's the point of it all to show up. I try to compose myself, smiling briefly at Suzanne when she comes in, accompanied by another grizzled producer who endlessly sparred with Zelda. Would she be pleased to see them? She'd certainly be gratified by the sheer volume of bums on seats. People pour in endlessly: acting legends, directorial greats and a healthy smattering of spiky-haired teenagers, here to support the boys in their hour of need. An atmosphere builds, a sense of expectation, and I swallow down the tears already threatening to engulf me. How am I going to get through this?

When the coffin comes in, borne by Michael and Zelda's brothers, I give way to the sobs. I can't believe she's in that box. We sing 'Jerusalem' (Zelda was an old leftie at heart) then listen to the vicar's opening address. Soon it's time for Michael's eulogy: I catch his eye and smile nervously, hoping that he's found words that satisfy his need to do her justice. How could I ever have judged his reserve so harshly? It's that lack of extravagance that makes his words so profound. It feels utterly truthful, utterly real. You sense how deeply he knew her and saw her in every observation. He talks

about how intrigued he was by her when he first met her, drawn in by her intelligence and passion for what she did. He touches briefly on how hard it was for them to be together, but how they both knew it was a given that they'd find a way through. I sense how different that is from the stuttering start that Charles and I have had, however colourful the declarations. He talks honestly about how hard she found motherhood first off, how she feared she'd never find a way to feel like herself once she had to fight to do the work she loved, but how she grew to treasure her relationship with her sons above everything. He even slips in a couple of jokes, revealing that he knew the Peter O'Toole story better than anyone (and didn't believe it either). Finally he tells us that she will always be a part of him, be a part of the boys, but that it's a tiny consolation for the deep sense of loss they feel at not having her alongside them. He captures her so brilliantly, so viscerally – it's like he scoops up everyone's grief and sculpts her with it. The air is thick with emotion by the time he sits down and I'm left dreading my moment at the pulpit more than ever. I want so much to do her proud, which is making me more incapable than I'd be if it barely mattered. I'm shaking like a leaf, hardly able to get through the next hymn. Oh, pull yourself together, Lulu, this is so not about you!

Hymn over, I get to my feet. And sit straight down again. I feel faint with terror. What happens if I stand up there and dissolve into a blubbering wreck? What kind of message does that send to the boys, when I've been trying so hard to set myself up as someone they can depend on? I suddenly realize I've only been to one funeral

since Mum's, which was for Dad's imperious, distant mother. We were resolutely unmoved, perhaps because it seemed so insignificant by comparison. Why am I here without Alice? It's so ridiculous, I honestly feel like I'm having a panic attack. I accept an arm squeeze from Gareth then force myself to make the long walk up to the lectern. I'd imagined I'd share all of this with Charles last night, get him to give me some handy hints for overcoming stage fright, when instead I simply managed to alienate and insult him and doom myself to a mere four hours' sleep in the process. I must look like the Bride of Frankenstein standing up here in three inches of foundation, white as a sheet. I get the poetry book out and place it on the lectern, swallowing down the nauseous panic. I make a faltering start, way too quiet to be heard all the way to the back.

Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.

My voice is wobbling all over the place. What possessed me to pick the poem that Dad read at Mum's funeral? It's the most beautiful evocation of loss that I know, but past and present are concertinaing up in a way that's making me worry I'm going to lose my grip. I grasp the lectern and force myself onward. Zelda would not be impressed.

Remember me when no more day by day

You tell me of our future that you planned:

I'm rushing now, wanting so much to have performed my task. But I don't want to race through, I want people to have time to absorb the sentiment. To appreciate that it echoes what Michael said about Zelda living on in the time we all shared with her.

Only remember me; you understand
It will be late to counsel then or pray.
Yet if you should forget me for a while

It's this line that finally floors me. The idea of forgetting – that in order to get on with living we have to forget, at least part of the time – seems so acutely painful. I feel so overwhelmed that I suddenly lose my way entirely. I stand there, frozen, looking out at all those faces, unable to continue. I'm furious with myself, screaming internally that I've got to focus, but outwardly paralysed. And that's when I hear the tap, tap, tap of Alice's ridiculously high black boots coming round the side of the front pews. Normally I call them her hooker boots, but that seems faintly sacrilegious under the circs. She's pink and perspiring, looking every bit as panicked as me. She crosses to the lectern, holds my hand as I find the gumption to get to the end.

And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,

Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.

I manage to read the last section as I intended to read the whole: slowly, thoughtfully and with the right degree of emotion. I walk back, still holding Alice's hand, monumentally relieved that I've done what I promised.

The funeral is as good a celebration of Zelda as one could hope for. There are a couple more readings, another hymn and then a rousing chorus of 'Let It Be' which Michael has picked to break up the pomp and circumstance. Alice joins in all of it with gusto, even though she only met Zelda once or twice. I've got a million questions to ask about her arrival, but mostly I'm just happy she's here. All the knotty problems that seemed so critical to sort out feel like an irrelevancy. Or is it just that I know we can face them down now they're out in the open?

'How'd you get here?' I ask, as soon as people begin to file out. Alice grins. 'Police escort.' It's then that I notice Ali standing with Jenna in the entrance vestibule. He does wear that uniform very well: who knew epaulettes could be so sexy? Well, I guess anyone who's watched *An Officer And A Gentleman* as many times as me. Richard Gere was way more appealing when he knew acting was his specialist subject rather than world peace. Maybe there should be some kind of revolving door where the Dalai Lama starts starring in shoot-'em-up action films and Nelson Mandela tries his hand at romantic comedy.

‘Hello,’ I say, unable to think of anything more useful. Now it’s all over I’ve gone back to my useless, washed-out state, although setting eyes on Ali is more cheering than I could ever have predicted.

‘Lulu!’ shrieks Jenna, hugging me like we’ve been estranged for decades. I give her a proper hug back nevertheless, monumentally grateful that she’s short-circuited the agonizing and brought Alice straight back to me. Alice is still clinging on to me like it’s the first day of school, which suits me just fine.

‘Can we meet you at the car?’ she asks Ali and Jenna, and we cross to a pew at the back of the church. We hug for a bit, both teary, then break apart.

‘I didn’t mean any of it, Lulu, really I didn’t,’ she says.

‘But some of it was true!’ I say. ‘What you said about Charles – you weren’t completely right, but I have been kidding myself.’

‘Is it over? Please tell me it’s properly over?’

‘Yeah – yeah, this time it really is.’ I’m about to recount what happened, but the air goes out of me. ‘I’ll tell you later, but – apart from all the things which were obviously wrong – I guess knowing about the A levels and the Marmite’s more important than I realized.’

‘Yeah and you HATE Marmite. Imagine if he liked it.’

‘But I love you, even though you like beetroot.’

‘Mum liked beetroot,’ she says unexpectedly. ‘She made soup out of it that summer you kept playing with that awful Sarah girl from

down the road. You spat it out in the cheese plant and she sent you up to our room.'

It suddenly all comes flooding back to me, a whole memory that I'd deep frozen.

'That's right!'

Alice smiles. 'I remember loads of things, loads and loads of things we haven't talked about. Some of them are really boring, but I'll tell you all of them.'

'I'd love that,' I say, squeezing her hand.

'It's not like I don't think about her,' she continues. 'I guess it's that sometimes I don't feel like ripping the plaster off all over again. Not when it's always seemed so painful for you.'

And suddenly I see that she's been protecting me as much as she's been dismissing me. I can't entirely blame her when most of my life I've relied on her to hold my hand. Sometimes it must've felt like a crushing responsibility.

'You don't have to look after me any more,' I say, looking at her squarely. 'I think those eight minutes are up.'

'I like looking after you! I just want you to come home,' she adds imploringly. 'I spotted Mr Simkins feeding a sugar lump to a police horse on Friday and I couldn't bear that you weren't there for it.'

'Of course I'm coming home. But…' I pause, forming a thought that's only just come to me. 'But soon perhaps we might need to think about living apart.'

Alice looks shocked. I squeeze her hand again and continue.

‘Not because I love you any less, but because I need to learn to be me without you. And you need to be you without me. We’ll still be the twins, we just won’t be the twins twenty-four seven.’

As I say it, I realize how wrong we’ve been to spend our lives waiting for a man to wrest us apart. No wonder it’s hard for either of us to commit when the inevitable cost is so high: we need to take charge of our own destinies. But when I see how stricken she looks, I feel awful for having said it. She looks up the aisle, tears in her eyes, then turns back to me.

‘You’re right, I know you are. I just don’t always know who the me without you is.’

For the first time ever I feel like the grown-up.

‘That’s why we’ve got to do it. I know it’s going to be really hard, but there’ll be benefits.’ Alice casts me a doubtful look. ‘We’ll probably make more effort to go out and do stuff instead of just slobbing around in our trackie bottoms looking like trailer trash.’

‘Where though?’

‘Let’s face it: I love police horses, but Wisteria Lane’s not really us. We can go back to Hackney and share with some weirdo artists who live next door to each other. Or you can shack up with Jenna…’

Alice finally cracks a smile.

‘I’m not taking the piss, she loves you to bits. And thank God she sorted us out. I’ve been so stupid and stubborn.’

‘Before we do anything, we’ve got to go to Boston,’ counters Alice. ‘You need to sort it out with Dad, you really do.’

‘You’re on,’ I say, gratified to find that my fear’s melted away now I no longer feel like a needy kid, wanting her depleted family to conform to the script. If I approach him from a less tentative place, surely he’ll respond? And if he doesn’t, it won’t kill me. After these last few weeks I feel like I could cope with pretty much anything.

We share another silent hug, then head out to Ali’s squad car – parked at an outrageous angle in a residents’ bay – for the drive to the wake. I don’t know quite where to sit, but as I appear to be conjoined with Alice the back seems like the logical place. Doug or no Doug, Jenna can’t help but flirt with Ali. I swear she gets us lost on purpose to give her more eyelash-batting time.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she simpers. ‘They do say women have no spatial awareness and I’m afraid I’m living, breathing proof.’

I’m peering beadily between the seats, trying to suss out if he’s charmed. Hard to tell, but I need to find out exactly how they all ended up here, which at least throws her off course.

‘I couldn’t get hold of Alice last night, her phone was off, and then Doug got back early from the morgue and it was too good an opportunity to miss. So I rushed to find her in first break –’

Alice cuts in. ‘When I knew you hadn’t got the letter… I couldn’t leave you to get through it on your own.’

‘How did you get the address?’

‘I rang you first, but your phone was off, so I got Emily to find it out. I told her it was the least she could do. But then the traffic was beyond shit and we had to get to the arse end of nowhere. No offence to Barnes.’

‘Which is when the cavalry arrived!’ adds Jenna excitedly.

Ali’s been very quiet through all of this, focused on unravelling Jenna’s terrible misdirections. He looks into the rear-view mirror and I smile gratefully, even though I’m not sure what section of my face he can see.

‘This might be the moment you finally get me sacked,’ he says. ‘Not that it matters so much now.’

What does that mean? Because he suspects I’m feeling it too, so it’ll have been worth it? And I am I think, now that I know he’s not a total dick-swinging Neanderthal who goes round clubbing multiple women and bearing them off to his bed. Oh God, that’s sounding worryingly appealing: there’s definitely feeling there, dampened as it is by the chaos that reigns elsewhere.

The wake’s in a room at an upmarket rowing club further down the river. It’s woody and traditional, with spectacular views over the Thames. It’s absolutely packed, which at least affords me the opportunity to body-swerve Suzanne and all the other work drones I can’t face speaking to. Michael’s mobbed, but he fights his way through the herd towards me.

‘You did a magnificent job. She’d have been so impressed.’

‘No, she wouldn’t. I totally muffed up the middle bit. She would’ve loved your eulogy though, it was so –’ I pause, searching for something that doesn’t sound like it’s been copied out of a Hallmark card – ‘exactly right.’

‘Do you think so?’ he asks, uncharacteristically vulnerable. ‘You don’t think she’d have preferred something a little more reverential

and adoring?'

'It *was* adoring!' I tell him. 'It felt way more adoring because you knew all her flaws and you worshipped her anyway!'

I'm suddenly choked, catapulted back to that day at the zoo where she laid out her version of love. I'm thinking about recounting it to Michael, but I can see he's got to keep going with the glad-handing. I look around as he moves off, suddenly isolated. There's Gareth, trapped with Suzanne in the corner. Bloody hell, I want to stay here all day hugging Alice, comforting the boys and flirting with Ali while getting mildly, comfortingly tipsy on Baileys. But what I actually need to do is get straight back on the case, making the most of the last forty-eight hours before we shoot the wedding. The best thing I can do for the family is ensure that 'Last Carriage' provides some kind of swan song, rather than suggesting Zelda had lost her magic touch in those final months.

As I'm steeling myself to go over there, I'm saved by Ali appearing at my elbow. I smile gratefully at him, touched beyond measure that he answered Jenna's call and got them through London in double-quick time (God knows there's many a man who's pressed cancel when her name's sprung up). I can't leave, not just yet.

'Thank you *so* much,' I say. 'You had no reason to do this for me, no reason at all. All I ever seem to do is apologize, but I just want to say I'm sorry if I've seemed flighty or dismissive or…' I put a tentative hand out, wanting to touch him, but his body language doesn't invite me in.

‘Ah, don’t worry about it. I’m figuring you won’t need a siren to get through the school run so I’m thinking to make a move.’

‘Don’t go!’ I say, shrill and pathetic, suddenly desperate to keep him alongside me at all costs. There’s something so present about him, so solid – it’s nothing like Charles’s quavery unpredictability. I know now that it’s not just about us being in an affair, it’s about him. I’m sure wherever Charles is, whoever he’s with, he wants to be somewhere else, whereas Ali feels rooted.

‘I’m afraid I’m gonna have to. In fact, this might be it for our peculiar little encounters.’ He says it with a kind smile, but the words chill me. Is it too late for me to pull myself together and make the right choice?

‘Have you met someone?’ I ask him baldly, then curse my lack of subtlety.

‘In a way.’

There’s a pause, during which my heart slips towards my shiny black shoes and takes up residence.

‘Not like that,’ he says, cheeky grin back in place. ‘I’ve met my old detective superintendent, she was down in London a few weeks ago. They’ve offered me a massive promotion if I go back there and I thought why not? It’s a bit remote, right up in the Hebrides, but I figure I could do with a change of scene.’

‘But you said you liked making a difference! That you didn’t want to tempt tabbies down trees or – or something.’

‘Glad to see you were concentrating there, Alice. Oh no, sorry, it’s Lulu.’

I look at him, downcast and crushed.

'I'm teasing, I'm teasing!' he says, briefly touching my arm. My heart jumps: is he not going after all? 'No, I'm starting to think you were right about London. I reckon I've made eff all difference to anything down here.'

'That's not true!' I say, remembering my stupid, patronizing pontificating over dinner. 'I bet you've made a difference to loads of people.'

'How do you work that out?' he laughs.

'Because you actually care about stuff. You believe that you can make a difference, so you will. And I bet you don't treat criminals like they're total scum, I bet you treat them like people. Which is right and good, particularly when it's kids.'

What I want to say is that I know we could be really special to each other, if only he'd give us the chance. But of course if I said it I'd sound like Jenna, only way worse, so instead I'm telling him all the reasons why he's so admirable. Bar his incredibly sexy, muscular arms and fabulous kissing technique, of course. I'll save that for another day.

'I'm flattered, really I am.' Has he read my mind? 'But I've already made my decision. No more Tube, no more Mayor, no more running out of money a week after pay day. It's not like you've got any evidence anyway – you'd get thrown out of court, no question.'

'I have got evidence. You didn't treat *me* like a criminal. You could've booked me.'

'I wanted to bed you.'

‘You could’ve done that too.’

‘I seem to remember I tried.’

‘Not hard enough.’

He leans forward, pulls my hair back from my face. ‘Oh, I tried,’ he mutters into my ear.

Why was I such a fool? If I didn’t have to do Zelda’s bidding, even from beyond the grave, there’s nothing I’d like more than a lost afternoon with him. I know it sounds inappropriate under the circs, but it would relieve the pressure better than anything else I can think of. I stare up at him, trying to communicate it all, and he holds my gaze. He laughs, looks away. ‘What a shocking waste,’ he says in a tone that tells me that a holiday romance just isn’t his style. He’s probably right: I can strongly sense that after a single encounter I’d be seriously smitten.

He envelops me in the kind of hug that seems to take in every bit of me. ‘I’ll call you before I leave,’ he whispers. ‘I’m packing this weekend – if there’s time perhaps we can have a coffee.’ He smells of man: not aftershave, not shower gel – MAN. I bet Tarquin smells of eau de ego. The thought of being cast back into the hell of primped, preened media monsters is too awful to contemplate. I force myself to disentangle and, just as I do, I spot the most magnificent sight. It’s Tim Le Grande, tanned and trim, holding out his glass imperiously for a top-up.

‘Oh my God, stop!’ I say. ‘That man is literally holding my entire career in the palm of his hand.’

‘He doesn’t look like he could hold a twig in the palm of his hand,’ says Ali, taking in his long, willowy frame.

‘He might look a bit wussy, but he’s the most powerful British costume designer there is. He’s got Oscars coming out of his arse. If he’d lend me the frocks he’s got it would make everything all right. Well, not everything, but at least I’d have solved the work disaster.’

‘Go and ask him then!’ he says, giving me a gentle push in Tim’s direction. I falter, gripped by fear.

‘I can’t. I can’t just *ask* him.’

‘Why the fuck not?’

‘Because he’s Tim Le Grande! He’s already ignored, like, twenty phone calls. I’m sure he thinks television’s the opium of the masses. He probably thinks it’s way less glamorous than that – glue-sniffing maybe.’ I know I’m babbling, but I can’t stop. ‘I’m just going to humiliate myself. I can’t face it.’

‘Do you actually think he’s better than you?’

‘Of course he’s better than me, he’s a living legend! I’m only just past the stage of taking up trousers and sewing on buttons.’

‘Not from what you’ve told me you’re not. You’ve run this whole job single-handed. He might be more experienced than you, but it doesn’t mean he’s better. You might have Oscars coming out of your shapely little arse this time next year.’

I stare at him, rooted to the spot.

‘You’ve done way scarier things than this, Alice stroke Lulu.’

‘Don’t call me that! Like what?’

‘Stared down a rat. Ducked a speeding fine on pure charm. Helped get this whole family through the worst thing they could possibly imagine.’

I grin at him, loving the sense that he’s noticed stuff about me, totted it up. I wish we could have the chance to find out about each other properly. He makes a ‘what are you waiting for’ face. I stand there dumbly a few seconds longer then steel myself for the long walk across the room. I lock eyes with Alice en route, who’s clearly beyond excited about me and Ali’s extended tête-à-tête. If only she knew he’d booked a one-way ticket to the Outer Hebrides.

Tim’s deep in conversation with some grizzled old croc, so old that I can only assume they collaborated on *Gone With The Wind*. I wait for an age, feeling more and more foolish as I languish, unacknowledged. I stare accusingly at Ali, who gestures that I’ve got to tough it out. Eventually Tim turns, statesman-like, and looks me up and down.

‘And what’s your connection?’ he asks, no hint of warmth in his tone.

‘I’m Lulu. Lulu Godwin, Zelda’s right-hand woman.’ I swallow down a lump in my throat. ‘I don’t know if you got any of my messages?’

‘I’ve been abroad.’

‘Yes… I know. I really didn’t want to bother you, but the situation’s kind of desperate. Zelda always spoke so highly of you – not that she needed to, I mean, your reputation precedes you.’ Why must I waffle? I take a glancing look around, gratified to find Alice

and Ali looking straight at me. I try to drink in their support and use it to fake a poise and confidence that I'm not feeling.

'I see. And what was it that Zelda said about me?'

'That you had a lemon up your arse' is what springs to mind, but luckily my verbal diarrhoea doesn't stretch that far. Besides, I can see a faint smile coming: he can't help but be tickled by the memory of Zelda.

'How much she learnt from you. How meticulous you are, how thorough your research always was. And I learnt so much from her, so I guess in a funny way your expertise got passed down to me.'

Too much? He looks at me, gimlet-eyed, weighing me up.

'So you're all about the research, are you? And what is it you're pouring your research skills into right now?'

'It's non-stop Victoriana.' He's silent, waiting for me to dig myself a hole. 'I'm trying my best to make it authentic, or at least I was before all the costumes got burnt. Although the reality of Victorian costume was a bit too brutal. The women were so tightly laced in that their internal organs were squashed like bugs. They literally couldn't eat until they'd closeted themselves away and loosened their clothing.'

Am I boring him or impressing him? It's hard to tell. The stony silence persists, so I rattle on.

'I loved what you did on that Schiaparelli piece. I know Zelda did too.' The film was about Elsa Schiaparelli, a contemporary of Chanel's who never got the recognition she deserved. 'You really got

across how important those designs were, the fact she was as seminal an artist as Dalí or Picasso.'

Finally there's a smile.

'Thank you,' he says. 'I can't bear the dismissal of design; it gets subjugated and trivialized in a way that's simply unacceptable. And the same goes for our business too. The camera team get taken infinitely more seriously than the costume team, even though we have just as much to contribute to the look.'

And I'm in. We talk about our favourite designers, our favourite films, our favourite artists. Most of all we talk about Zelda. Hearing her described as a fledgling wardrobe girl is incredibly moving: it's a Zelda that even Michael didn't know, a girl who veered between awkwardness and brashness, all in an attempt to cover up her lack of certainty in herself.

'I knew she had enormous talent long before she did,' says Tim, lost in the memory. 'She'd carry around this box, filled with incredibly tangential scraps of inspiration – bark, sweet wrappers. I could sense that her eye was utterly unique.'

Eventually I pluck up the courage to ask the million-dollar question.

'I know that it's probably the kind of production you utterly despise, but I desperately want to make it the best it can be. It's the last thing with Zelda's name on it and I can't bear for it to be less than brilliant.'

'Lulu, of course I want to do anything I can to help.' Oh, thank God, thank God. 'But unfortunately the crates are packed up and

ready to go. They're in an aircraft hangar at Heathrow as far as I know.' He holds his palms up in a gesture of helplessness as my last sliver of hope disappears. I'm rooted to the spot, frantically scrabbling around for options. As I'm trying to fix a bright smile back on my face, Ali magically appears beside me.

'Hello, I'm Alistair,' he says, extending a hand. 'I'm here with Lulu. She's been very keen to speak to you.'

Tim instantly perks up at the sight of a man as handsome as Ali appearing in his peripheral vision.

'*Delighted* to meet you,' says Tim, uncharacteristically jolly, as I spill out the costume drama. Ali stands there, taking it in, then gives that cheeky smile of his.

'How do you fancy one last Bonnie and Clyde escapade before I do my moonlight flit?'

Before I know it, he's persuading Tim to let him use his warrant card to get the costumes released.

'I'll FedEx them the minute we've wrapped!' I plead. 'I promise they'll be at Burbank before you know it.'

'It's a huge insurance risk,' he counters. 'And it doesn't sound like you've got the best track record in that department.'

'For Zelda?' I beg.

'With a police guard?' adds Ali.

'Timing is everything,' says Tim. 'They're being flown out on the four-thirty. I doubt you'll make it, but feel free to give it your best shot.'

And with that we're out of the door. I kiss Alice, mutter a garbled explanation to Michael and leap into the passenger side of the panda car.

'Siren?' asks Ali.

'Obviously!'

I can't believe he ever had the nerve to question my speed. He goes about 120 mph the whole way and I can tell from his expression that he's loving every minute of it. We park in a special blues and twos bay right outside Terminal Five and slam out of the car like the Dukes of Hazzard. This is way more fun than Doctors and Nurses. Or maybe not…

'So do I come with you?'

'Too right you do. You're my right-hand woman.'

'Could you get sacked for this?'

'After today I reckon I might be asking "Do you want fries with that?" for the rest of my working life.'

'Sorry.'

'Ach, it's OK. My boss in Scotland's got a bit of a soft spot for me. I'm sure it'll be fine.'

I'm stabbed by a sharp pang of jealousy. I bet she's some kind of bleached blonde, chain-smoking harridan with a Jane Tennison complex. I really don't want him to go. By now Ali's striding up to some kind of security office, where uniformed men holding guns imagine they're holding their penises. Gone is the wry jokiness, replaced by a seriousness that elevates him way above Emily in the acting stakes. His summing-up is a masterful piece of improvisation.

‘I wish I could explain the background, but unfortunately I’m bound by the Official Secrets Act.’

‘I understand the problem, but I’m afraid it really does require a warrant,’ says the most officious-looking dick-swinger.

‘I appreciate your point,’ says Ali smoothly. ‘That said, in matters of national security you can’t be too careful.’

National security? Since when has a crinoline qualified? The men cast us beady glances and go out back for a huddle. We wait for absolutely hours, with Ali insisting that I can’t badger them about the imminence of take-off. They finally emerge, grim-faced, and I await the no.

‘They’re being X-rayed. As long as there are no foreign bodies, they should be returned to you within the next hour.’

Oh God. When the X-ray machine picks out a load of whaleboned corsets, surely we’ll be busted? Luckily Ali’s allusion to issues too thorny for mere mortals to understand has done the trick and the boxes come back to us without a murmur of complaint. There are far too many for us to carry, so we perch on top of them while I wait for one of the unit drivers to come out and collect them. It’s turned into a gloriously sunny afternoon and, although the circumstances are beyond bizarre, I can’t help but enjoy the warmth on my face. And the company, of course.

‘Thank you,’ I say, heartfelt, turning to kiss Ali on the cheek.

‘You don’t need to thank me. London was pretty boring till you tipped up. Now I might even miss it.’

He takes my hand as he says this and I allow myself a glimmer of hope.

'Well, don't go! I'll make it fun and romantic and anything else you want it to be. I've been such a twat, Ali. There was this other guy and –'

'Jesus, you really can talk, can't you?'

'I just need to explain…'

'You don't. Jenna told me all about your ding-dong with the married guy.'

Fucking Jenna, I'm going to kill her.

'She can hardly talk, she's banging an undertaker! I was so stupid, Ali, ignoring what was under my nose. I mean, if I hadn't screwed it up you'd be becoming the kind of person I could wear beige safari slacks in front of and still feel sexy.'

'Pardon?'

'Oh, it doesn't matter. I just wish I hadn't snuffed it out before it even started. Why do I start falling for yet another man I can't have? It's ridiculous.'

'Are you falling for me?'

'I am *literally* turning into Jenna. This is me, zipping up my mouth.' I make a zipping up motion and turn to look towards the baggage trolleys. 'I'd do long distance if you would. I'm sure I've got a kilt left over from a few jobs ago. Some pale imitation of *Braveheart* we shot in Bratislava. Borscht gets pretty inedible after six weeks, I can tell you.'

Ali laughs.

‘Lulu, turn round.’

‘No.’

‘I mean it, turn round.’

‘No!’

‘Fine, I’ll tell your back how I feel. You are completely fantastic and I have fancied you rotten since that first night. But you obviously didn’t feel the same way until you knew I was leaving, and I can’t help but think that’s what’s doing it for you. And even if it wasn’t, you love your twin more than anything, so where would that leave us, considering it turns out I hate London more than you hate rats? There’s no future in it, babe. And I can’t go falling head over heels for a woman I can’t have. Might be your specialist subject, but it sure isn’t mine.’

I turned round about when he said ‘head over heels’, my face crumpling up with how lovely he is. He puts his arm around me and I hunker down, slipping my fingers through the gaps in his shirt.

‘Don’t go,’ I mutter into him.

‘I have to,’ he says, kissing the top of my head.

It’s right then that Paul the driver arrives, looking somewhat shocked to find me teary and bereft, firmly entwined with an officer of the law. Ali immediately comes over all practical, directing him to the special parking spot and helping heave the boxes into the back. The wake’s long since over, so he offers to drop me back at home, limiting himself to puttering along at a mere 90 mph. He only uses the siren once, when some temporary traffic lights really get his goat. Honestly, it’s like a road trip with Toad of Toad Hall.

He pulls up and I take a quiet moment to enjoy being back here. The light's on, curtain's open, and I think I can make out Carrie and Miranda whining away even from here. It feels so good to be home. I click my seatbelt off and look at him imploringly. He grabs my face and kisses me like he means it.

'I'll see you before I go, I promise. I'm leaving Sunday.'

I reach for him this time, kissing him like he's my only source of oxygen.

'You'll replace me in a heartbeat,' he says infuriatingly once we've broken apart. He points discreetly at Mr Simkins, pruning his roses a few gardens away. 'Surely he's widowed? Quite a catch in this neck of the woods I'd imagine.'

'It's not funny.'

'I know it's not,' he says quietly, tone deadly serious. 'I'll see you soon.'

I climb out of the car, forcing myself not to slam the door in frustration. Who knew he was the prize? Not me, not quick enough. I am SUCH a fool.

Chapter Twenty-one

‘Action!’ shouts Tarquin, his horrid nasal twang ringing out across the church. Here comes Emily, flumping up the aisle, pouting. It’s not a pout of pleasure, more the petulant sneer of a bratty 5-year-old denied an éclair. That’s my fault, I’m afraid. The costumes threw up the most divine wedding dress, rendered all the more divine by the lace panel I stitched in across the plunging neckline. Those puppies she’s so proud of are well and truly locked in their kennel. She looked set for a tantrum when she tried it on, but I quietly alluded to the many jobs we might work on together in the future. I’m pretty sure that’ll keep her from coming up with any marriage-murdering revelations.

Charles turns to look down the aisle, casting a convincing smile of joy in her direction. God, he’s a good actor. How much of what we shared was down to his thespian talent? I do truly believe we fell for one another, but also that it was ultimately a house built on sand. I was so drawn in by it all, but his faux nobility about staying with a wife he’s no longer in love with seems fatally flawed to me now. Love needs tending to in order to remain a gift that keeps on giving: if he really has lost that loving feeling, never to be returned, he surely needs to offer her the chance to find it with someone else? I

haven't said any of this – not now it's none of my business – and even if I wanted to, he's making a real song and dance about cutting me dead at any available opportunity. There was a time I longed for him to leave, but now he hasn't risked it all for me I can't help but feel I've had a lucky escape. Complicated turns out to be over-rated, just like Alice said.

Alice has coped admirably with the Herculean task of not saying 'I told you so', even though she did. The fact that Richard shouted at an old lady who was using all her coppers to pay for a bottle of sherry so viciously that she cried may've kept her smugness in check. I'm happy to say that she emerged from her hiding place in the stock room and finally gave him his marching orders. Now she's concentrating all her romantic energies on willing me and Ali to get together. She's longing to meddle, but I've forbidden her from so much as breathing in his direction. He's made his decision and I've got to respect it. At least in part…

'Cut!' shouts Tarquin. He turns round, surveying the troops. 'That's a wrap, people.' A cheer goes up, and the hugging and back-slapping begins. Tarquin hangs back, sullen and muted. It's no great surprise considering that his masterful cut has been torn to shreds by the powers that be. Knowing Damien was eating out of his hand, Suzanne called in a favour from one of her network of old school contacts. When the commissioners saw it they were horrified and immediately insisted it was put back together the way it was intended. It's certainly not a heartbreaking work of staggering genius, but at least it makes sense. When we had a cast and crew

screening, people were pleasantly surprised how watchable it was, but Tarquin was definitely gritting his teeth. I'm sure he's furious with me, but with the fag ends discovered but not attributed he can't afford to do any more than scowl.

How to win friends and influence people. At least I've still got Gareth on my side – and our brilliant team, of course. I distribute presents to them all, mini sewing kits with the name of the job stitched on the leather case (they'll probably bury them once it transmits). It feels so weird to be the bestower of wrap gifts – it was always Zelda's job, and boy they could be eccentric. I remember the time she gave me a bottle of Drambuie, the world's most disgusting alcohol, which I swear she'd been given by Rex Harrison in the mid 1970s. Job done, I make to slip away, despite their protestations that I have to come to the wrap party. People to see, places to go. Well, at least one person.

I say a brief, terse goodbye to Tarquin and give Emily an insincere hug before looking around for Charles. Whatever I might've said, the idea of walking away and potentially never seeing him again still feels utterly wrong. We shared such a lot, however fruitless it ultimately proved. He's amongst a gang of actors, glass in hand. I say a general goodbye, then turn to him.

'Bye, Charles, see you around.'

'Oh, Lulu, are you off?' he says, friendly but general. 'What a shame you're not coming to the wrap party.'

'I can't, I'm afraid,' I say, trying to communicate that, despite the superficiality of the exchange, it did all mean something.

‘Well, it’s been an utter pleasure to work with you and I hope we see each other again.’

I expect all the other actors to be following the exchange like a tennis match, but a) they’re actors so they’re totally self-obsessed and b) Charles is rather a good actor, so it all sounds terribly bland. Maybe it’s just that it didn’t really matter to him, but I don’t believe that’s true.

I give him a last, brief smile and head off to the car park. Of course I still have feelings, but I know I’ve made the right call by walking on by. If I’d hung in there I could’ve stayed a mistress till God knows when; in my heart of hearts I know he never would’ve left. Even so, my stomach clenches horribly as I drive away from the car park.

I dump the car at home, stopping to pull on a pair of (reasonably flattering) jeans and touch up my day-worn make-up. I’d rather something sexier, but the sun’s going down and I know I’ll freeze. I wait impatiently for the Tube, looking at my watch obsessively. Will this work? I get out at Chalk Farm and look up and down the road, missing Ali coming through the barriers. He’s wearing a cagoule affair, worryingly reminiscent of an anorak, but he still looks beyond cute.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ he says, twinkly, but with a disappointing kiss on the cheek.

‘You’re not, I was early. Which never happens.’

‘Never?’

‘Never.’ I hug him and kiss him on the stubbly cheek for far longer than is strictly necessary. But then, none of this is strictly necessary. ‘It’s one of my most irritating characteristics.’

‘Babe, I’m sorry but I’ve only got an hour – my flat’s half in boxes, half not and the van’s coming at seven a.m. You should’ve come for a cup of tea. Done some proper work for once in your life.’ He says this with a grin that makes it entirely forgivable.

‘Come on then,’ I say, swallowing down how gutted I feel. I head towards the bridge opposite. ‘We’ve got a lot to pack in.’

‘Pack in, very funny. Where are we going?’

‘Don’t be so impatient!’ I reach for his hand then realize I’m not allowed to and try to subtly swing it back. He spots the subterfuge and grabs it, a warm glow spreading through me at the contact. I lead him down past all the lovely little shops in Regent’s Park Road and up Primrose Hill, exaggerating the steepness so I can clutch his hand a little tighter. We get to the top and survey the amazing panorama.

‘Wow,’ he says, ‘I’ve never been here before.’

‘I’ve never been to Arthur’s Seat,’ I reply. ‘Or at least I’ve only been to a mock-up in the Czech Republic. Does that count?’

‘No, Lulu, definitely doesn’t count.’

‘Will you take me?’

‘Take you generally, or take you to Arthur’s Seat?’

‘God, you’re puerile!’

He brushes some hair away that’s blowing into my face.

‘We’ve been through this, Alice stroke Lulu. It’s too far, there’s too much tying us both to where we live.’

‘I’ve been thinking about it, Ali, really hard, and I want you to hear me out.’

‘Here she goes!’

I turn my face to him, put a finger to his lips.

‘Don’t mock me! You’re right: when I was Alice stroke Lulu it never would’ve worked. But I’m not any more, not after everything that’s happened. I’m Lulu: I might even be Louise on occasion. I love my sister so much, but we can’t live like we’re one entity any more. We’ve got to be braver than that.’ I look at him, wondering if he cares enough to want to hear this. He’s just looking at me, serious-faced, so I tumble on. ‘I’ve always picked these men where I’ve known in my heart of hearts there’s no future, because it’s been safer. But I need to grow up, strike out. So there is a future if you want it.’

‘Tell me about it,’ he says. ‘Tell me about that future.’

I pause, nervous. I am *so* not playing hard to get.

‘Well… I’ve saved some money up on this job and I ended up with a whole big bonus that Zelda had set up…’ I swallow down the lump in my throat, ‘because I’d pretty much designed it. So I thought I could take three months off. Perhaps I could come and knit socks and fry haggis while you’re at work.’

‘Glad you don’t think I’m a hick or anything,’ he says, grinning.

‘No, I’ve got an offer for a film in the summer. A friend of Zelda’s who she talked me up to those last few months. I can do prep for it

anywhere. And I'd like to do it wherever means I'll be close to you.'

'What, so despite the fact you wouldn't even return a simple text two months ago, you're now willing to move to the back end of beyond?' He gives a sheepish smile. 'And by the way, I've been exaggerating. I'm actually going to Glasgow.'

'Why did you do that?!'

'Because it made me laugh. Outer Hebrides? I'd be arresting rabbits for dealing lettuce. Partly cos I wanted to see how much you cared, and – I have to say – you're doing quite a convincing job.'

'You bastard, I can't believe you did that!'

'I was just stringing you along, Lulu. Any fool can see how much you and Alice care about each other and I don't want to make you unhappy. And I know you're playing it down, but this other guy's obviously turned your head something spectacular. I'm not going to be sloppy seconds.'

'He did, I'm not going to lie to you. But it wasn't real. Well, it was a bit real, but not real enough for me to believe it could ever work.'

Ali looks at me doubtfully and I grab his hand.

'Look, here's my suggestion. There's this new game show called "City Idol" in which I prove to you that London's delightful while you prove that Glasgow's the bee's knees. Whatever happens, I'll go where you go for the next three months. Then I'm going to Czechoslovakia to recreate the Crimean War and you can concentrate on charming hoodies into submission, after which we can review the situation. Maybe in a year or so you'll feel better about down here, or I'll get given sole charge of "Take the High

Road" and feel as Scottish as anything. I don't much care, I just know I don't want you to slip through my fingers.'

I look at him, willing him to agree, and he answers me with another spectacular kiss. I'm wrapped up against the cold, utterly safe. I give myself a brief internal reality check – now I'm not Alice stroke Lulu, I mustn't suddenly become Lulu stroke Ali. This is the first time in my life I've stood on my own two feet and it feels good.

I point out all the landmarks you can see from the Hill, paying special attention to London Zoo. Then we wander down, hour long since passed, and hole up in a nearby pub on the proviso that I help him pack until every item's accounted for, although I'm thinking of way more interesting ways to spend his last night in town. I've got to make up for lost time, particularly now Alice and I have booked to go to Boston next week.

Two glasses of wine in, Ali insists we have to return to the job in hand, so I take his and follow him out. As we're walking back down Regent's Park Road – possibly my favourite street in London – my phone beeps. It's sure to be Alice, desperate for an update. I discreetly slip it out of my pocket, not wanting to break the moment. It's not Alice, it's Charles.

> I love you. And I'm sorry

is all it says. I stare at it a second too long, wondering if I should reply and what that reply should say. Then I push the phone deep into the recesses of my bag, slip my arms around Ali and kiss him like my life depends on it.

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